WESTERN ACTION NOVELS MAGAZINE

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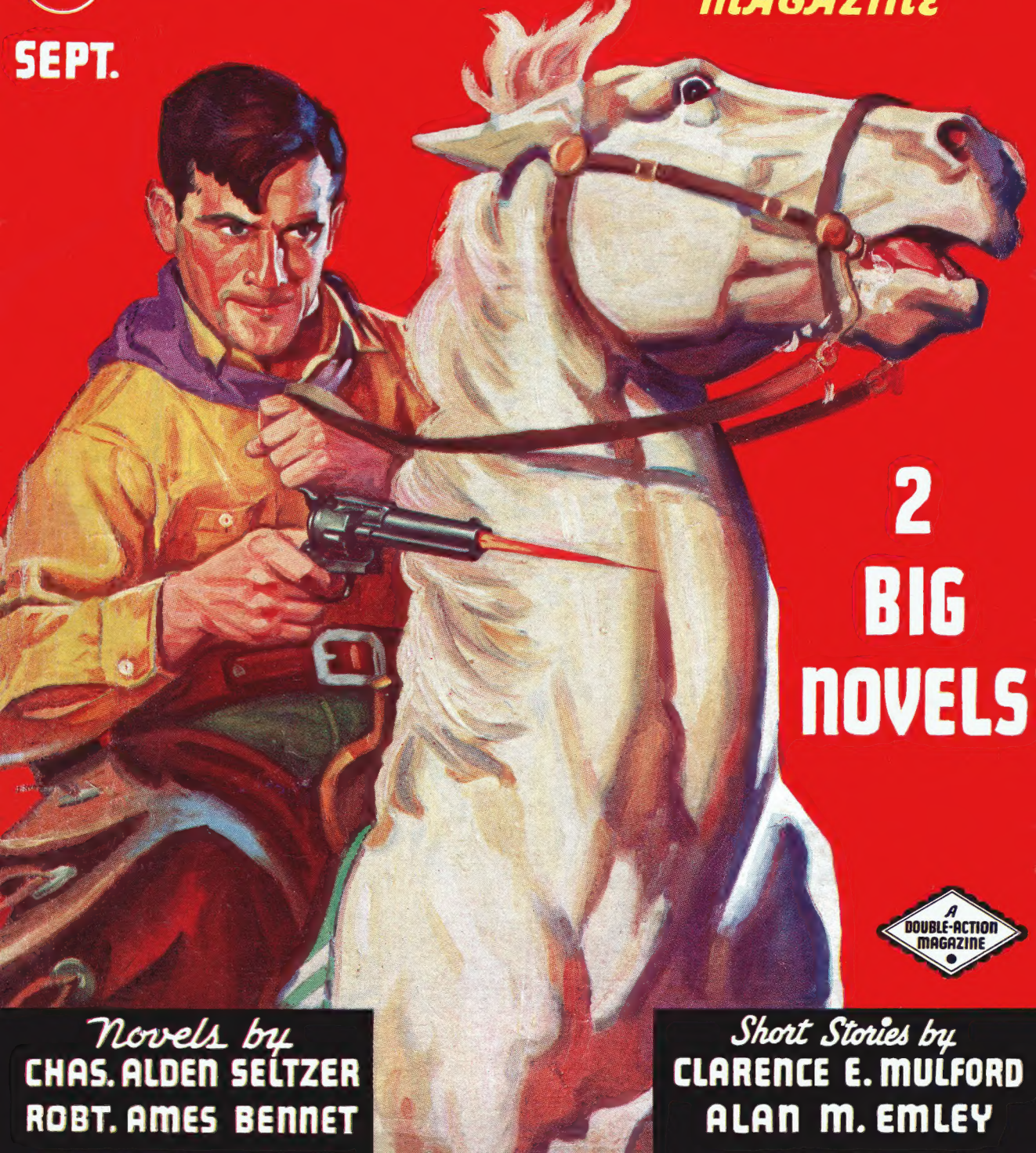

2 BIG NOVELS

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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ROBT. AMES BENNET

Short Stories by
CLARENCE E. MULFORD
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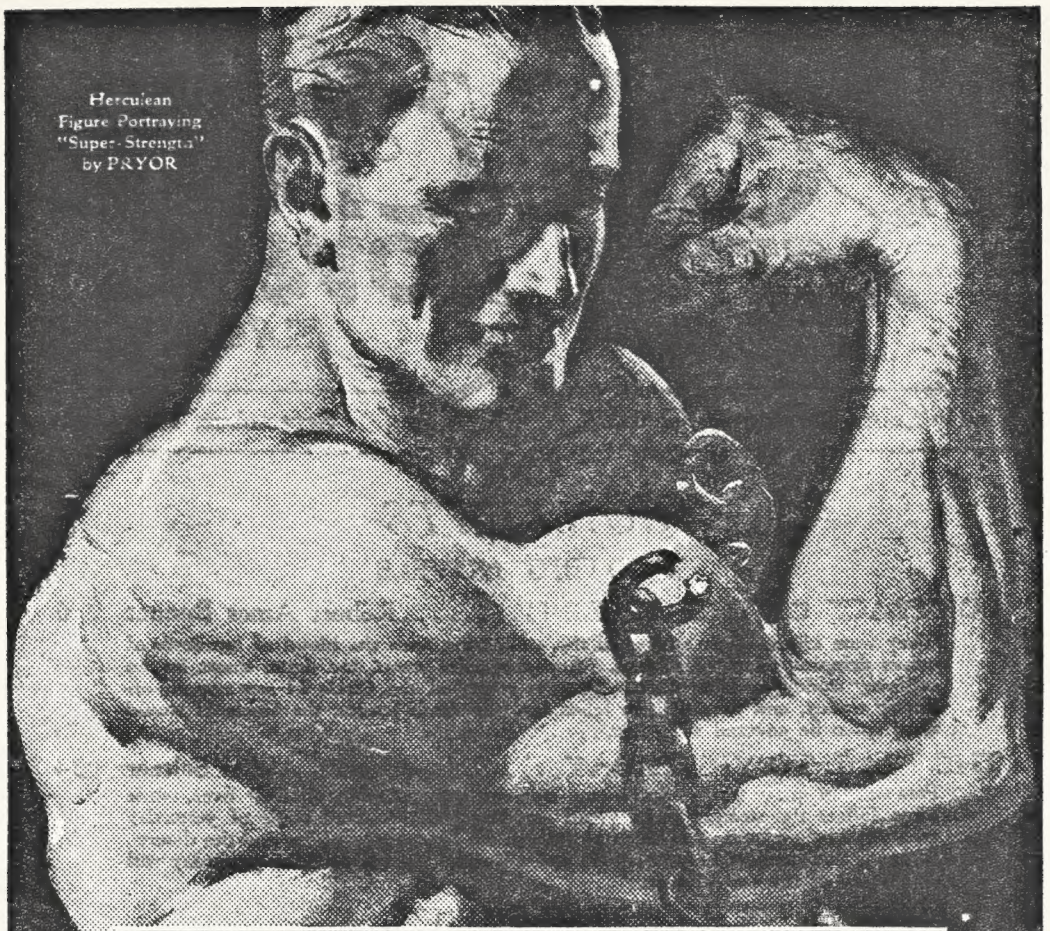

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WESTERN ACTION NOVELS MAGAZINE

Yearly Subscription—75 Cents — A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE — September, 1936, Issue

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They were killers, these wolves of the mountains, with the blood of hundreds of calves dripping from their fangs. And they were smart, too damn smart for an ordinary waddy to catch them. But the owner of the Circle H was not an ordinary waddy, and should these lobos run free much longer, the Circle H would once again be covered with dust.

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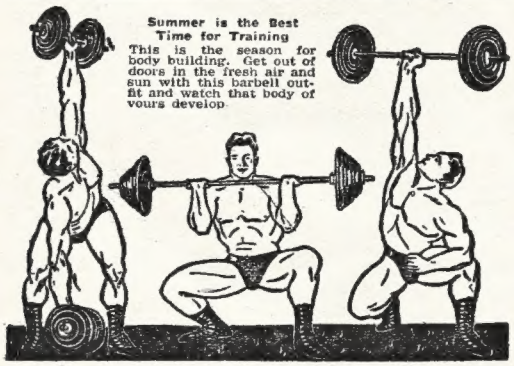

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The Comeback of the Circle H

Complete Novel by

Robert Ames Bennet

Jim thrust the rifle barrel over the rock and pulled the trigger

CHAPTER I

ONLY a few of the wildest and wiliest steers escaped the fall combing of the Caratopi Hills, in the last round-up of the Circle H. Dad Horton had gone bust on the great slump in cattle.

Ten years earlier the old man would have stuck and fought his way back to prosperity. But nesters had homesteaded the best part of his free range, and he was past eighty-three.

So his top riders curried the scrub and crags and gullies with a thoroughness that the rough back range had never before known. Cows, calves and steers—every pound of live beef that could be hunted

out—all were rounded up and trailed off on the long drive across the mountains to the Denver stockyards.

Freights were high. By trailing the herd, the old man saved so much on expenses that the sale gave him enough to pay off his men and take up his notes at the bank.

After that nothing was left for him to do but lie around and sicken through his last days in the luxurious city home of his "dude" son.

Back on the Circle H ranch the old log buildings stood empty and forlorn. The nearest nesters were too poor to think of acquiring more land than they had filed on. And all the cattlemen of the region had been as hard hit as Dad Horton by the beef market. None could bid a dollar for the ranch.

Yet the scant scattering of renegade steers left in the back range were not long masterless. Before the first snows of October whitened the red hill crags, Lobo and Two-Toes shifted across the divide. Parley Brent and the other cattlemen of the south Caratopis had become uncomfortably energetic in their hostilities against the giant gray wolf and his equally huge mate.

Years of hazard against trap and poison and gun had given the fierce pair a craftiness and wisdom far above the high average of their kind. They had no intent to linger on the Circle H range. For there, while young, Lobo had first felt the sting of a rifle bullet, and Two-Toes had lost part of her left forefoot in the steel jaws of a trap.

Dusk was thickening into night as they trotted down from the divide into this now-old range. In a deep gully they scented one of the abandoned steers. But they were not hungry. They had killed a Bar X calf coming up the far side of the divide. The uneasy urge to run clear of the Circle H overcame their impulse to kill for sheer blood lust.

At the border of the Hills Two-Toes took the lead. She quickened into the wolf lope and sped off aslant the undulating bench lands. Midnight would have found her and Lobo miles away in the midst of the Broken Box Y. Only, as chance would have it, their route carried them within scenting distance of the deserted Circle H ranch buildings.

Two-Toes was first to notice the staleness of the man-scent. She stopped to sniff. Lobo slid into the lead and whined for her to come on. She lingered, all her keen curiosity aroused. Here was something strange, yet not altogether beyond experience. Only two seasons back she and Lobo had come upon the ruins of a nester's shack that had been heaved into a gully by cowboys.

Against the wishes of Lobo, she turned toward the ranch. He glided after her, with every whitish bristle on his back stiffly erect. Thick clouds had overcast the stars, and the ranch buildings showed no lighted window.

Even the luminous greenish yellow eyes of the wolves barely could see the dim outlines of stable and feed sheds, corral and ranch house. But the cool blackness of night gave all the more keenness to the noses of the prowlers.

Like Two-Toes, Lobo breathed in the many scents of man and horse and cow, and, like her, he realized that all the scents were stale. Yet still he hung back, reluctant. This was a den of their one great enemy, the deadly killer that stood upright.

Though no less wary than her mate, Two-Toes was even more wise. The scents were all many days old. Therefore no living creature lurked in the man-dens. Therefore the only danger would be from traps or poison.

She slunk in closer around the old log house. The door and windows had been left tight shut. She trotted down into the spring-rill gully to lap a drink before circling around to the stable. Lobo glided after her, still uneasy.

A sound such as might have been made by a huge rat checked the careless trot of Two-Toes. She crouched and crept along the side of the stable to the open door. Her nose confirmed what her ears had already told her. There was a porcupine in that deliciously odorous den.

The porcupine did not hear the stealthy approach of the gray hunters. He went on gnawing the salty boards in the box end of a manger. Like Brother Skunk, he had little fear of other beasts. To ward off the attack of even a mountain lion, all he needed to do was roll himself into a bundle of needle spikes.

Driven desperate by hunger, Two-Toes had once killed a porcupine. But her muzzle still ached with the memory of the poisonous barbed quills that had festered their way through from side to side.

For another thing, the half open door of

the stable had too much the look of a trap. Instead of gliding in to pounce on the unsuspecting porky, she snarled and drew back.

Lobo tensed every stringy muscle of his lean body, ready to bound away in full flight. But nothing startling followed that indiscreet snarl of his mate. No roaring-stick thundered the deadly hate of the men creatures. None of the hard-biting stings that went with the stick's roar came zipping through the darkness. Only, after a little pause, the porcupine impudently again began to gnaw.

Their noses, then, had told them the truth. The men creatures had gone away from their dens. There was nothing to fear around this once dangerous place; no need to hurry off through the night to the country beyond.

Two-Toes' nostrils quivered with the memory of the savory warm scent of the steer in the hill gully. She and Lobo had found a land of food and safety.

The wind had risen, had turned icy cold. A drive of gritty sharp snow came swirling down the gusts. The first of the fall blizzards was setting in. The drifts would make good hunting.

Two-Toes sat back on her haunches and raised her hoary gray head. Down-wind wailed her long-drawn howl, unutterably dismal. Lobo's throat swelled with responsive throbs. He squatted down near her and joined in the howling.

CHAPTER II

THE one winter in the city did worse for Dad Horton than eighty-three years of rough hard life on the range. It put him on his back.

"I'm 'bout ready to cash in my chips, Henry," he told his son. "Can't say I'm right sorry. Doc tells me I couldn't sit a saddle, not even if you was to lift me on. Being so, I'm ready to go over the Range. Only thing troubles me is the Circle H. You wouldn't be minded now to take hold and restock the old range, would you, son?"

"Sorry, Dad. You know Della will not go over there even for a summer outing, and—there's no money now in cows."

"Mebbeso, mebbeso. Only—to think of the brand going dead and the home you was born in falling to pieces. Tell you what. That there five thousand Bill Clement paid up on what he owes me—any objections to me using it, Henry?"

"Your money is yours, Dad; and I'll back you with double your stake if there is any use you can get out of it to make yourself happy."

The old man shook his head.

"Five's enough, along with what Bill still owes. I've got it all figgered out in my mind. I won't lie easy under the sod if the Circle H goes dead, too. 'Member Tex Foster—old foreman I used to have—died when you was a youngster? Well, his son Pete didn't amount to shucks—drifted off. Last year young Jim turned up—grandson of old Tex. Right smart cow hand. Got a smart wife—reg'lar range-bred girl—and a baby—cute little cuss. Almost seemed like they might 'a' been the—grandchildren I used to count on you giving me, Henry."

"Well, Dad, you know— About these young people—you wish to give them a start-off?"

"Uh-huh. I sent Jim to Bill Clement. When Bill came to see me last week, he told me he had to lay Jim off, mid-winter. Sent him over with a carload of calves. Just heard the boy was down on his luck, sick. I been thinking it over. You won't restock the Circle H and keep the brand alive. I'm going to offer the whole outfit to Jim Foster. Any objections?"

"Not if it will make you feel better."

"Then I'll ask you to go out to the Yards and see if you can round him up."

Henry was a busy man. But the doctor had told him that his father would not live to see the Hogbacks take on their spring green. Before evening he returned from the stockyards with three passengers in his limousine—a white-faced young man, an equally frail-looking young woman, and a rosy-cheeked, yellow-haired baby girl.

LITTLE May already had a very engaging way with men. The dignified Henry Horton insisted upon the privilege of carrying her into the house. When he placed her upon his father's bed, she promptly cuddled up to the old man and reached for his beard.

Dad Horton's age-furrowed face crinkled across with flattered embarrassment. He looked up sheepishly at the young father and mother.

"Howdy, Molly; howdy, Jim. Looks sort of like she's starting in early."

Molly Foster's grief-dulled face warmed with a smile.

"She's worth a million to us, Mr. Horton. We named her May. She's," the smile faded, "she's all we have. I'm just out of hospital. We lost our baby boy."

"You don't say? That's purty bad, Molly girl, purty bad! Bill Clement told me Jim was down with the pneumony. Reckon, though, he hadn't heard tell about you. Well, well. I sure feel bad your boy didn't live. I got particular reasons for wishing he had."

Young Foster cleared his throat.

"Molly and me—we're sorry to find you down sick, Mr. Horton."

The old man did not seem to hear this. He rubbed his wrinkled hand over the silky yellow curls of Baby May.

"Looks sort of like you two ain't had much luck in town, heh? You still figgering on sticking here?"

"No, sir. I'm going to hit out soon as I can buy a horse with legs enough to climb Berthoud Pass."

"You are, are you? Leaving Molly to keep on pleasuring herself with the city sights?"

"Pleasuring!" The young woman put up a thin hand before her sunken blue eyes. "What's all the bright lights and movies to the stars above the snow peaks and the clean wind singing in the pine tops?"

Her husband made a more direct reply.

"She's staying in town only till I can find an outfit where she can get on as cook."

"That so? Uh—mebbe I know of a place. How'd you like to strike out for yourselves—own your own brand?"

Foster's disreputable old Stetson crumpled in his bony fingers.

"I—I'd like it mighty well, sir. Maybe some time, when times ease up. Only now it'll be hard even getting on to ride for one of the old outfits. They're still laying off men."

"They are, Jim. Bill Clement told me. Stock growing is down mighty low. All the better time to start in. You can pick up a purty fair bunch of cows and calves for five thousand and credit. Want to buck the game?"

This time the young man's face did not even lighten. He swept the palm of his right hand out over his leveled left palm.

Dad Horton again stroked the yellow curls of Baby May.

"Uh-uh, boy. You ain't swept clean yet. How about this here gold? You didn't need even that to decide me. All I wanted to know was if you and Molly had got your fill of the city. That's settled. All's left is to deed you the Circle H."

"But—but, Mr. Horton, I can't put up a cent. I had to sell my saddle to pay the doctor, and—"

"Shut up. I'm bossing this deal. My son Henry here ain't a cowman. He don't know cows and he don't want to know 'em. All the same, I'm set on keeping the Circle H alive. It's yours for the taking—ranch and brand and a cash stake of five thousand for a little herd to begin restocking the range. What d'you say? Is it a go?"

Jim Foster gaped. He stood dumfounded. His wife was first to find her tongue.

"Oh, Mr. Horton, if—if you really mean it! If only there's something we can do for you!"

"It ain't a gift, Molly. It's a bargain. You won't find it any too easy. The nesters will keep crowding in on the east. 'Twon't be long before the hills'll be the only free range left. You'll have to feed more and more. But if you take over the old brand, you take it to stick. That's the sole and only condition. I want to ease out knowing for sure the Circle H ain't going to be scratched off the register of brands."

Jim gripped the old man's hand.

"I didn't savvy right off. You can count on us, sir. We'll stick, won't we, Molly?"

The old man drew Baby May's dimpled face down against his bearded cheek.

"Henry, you hear that. Go tell your lawyer to draw up the deed and bill-of-sale."

Henry Horton chucked Baby May under the chin and smiled at her parents.

"No. Sit still and visit with my father. You are to stay for dinner. I'll have the papers drawn and sent up for him to sign."

Young Foster followed him out into the hall.

"Mr. Henry—just a moment. Seems like it can't be true. At any rate I figure Mr. Horton must be kind of off his head. Molly and me, we never did anything in particular for him. But I see you don't want to cross him. Why not let him make out the papers the way he wants, but me give you a deed back?"

"You agreed to take over the ranch and run it."

"Yes, sir. Only I don't want you to think we're the kind to work Mr. Horton. He's old and—"

"Not too old to put through a deal that will give him satisfaction. The Circle H is worth nothing as it stands. The five thousand will be money well spent if it brings contentment to my father's last days. It all goes to you and your wife with our best wishes. But do not forget your part of the bargain. You have promised to keep the Circle H alive."

"Yes, sir. We'll do it—Molly and me. We'll stick till hell freezes over!"

CHAPTER III

OF the thirty and more wild steers left on the back range of the Circle H, one alone had lived to graze the tender green spring grass along the south-facing slopes of the Caratopis.

He was an old Texas longhorn that Dad Horton had picked up cheap with a bunch of other scrubs before he settled down to the wiser policy of raising only pure bred white-faces.

Legs as long in proportion as his horns, and a nature as wild and hardy as his looks, had enabled Longhorn to escape round-up after round-up. Never once in six winters had the worst blizzards driven him down out of the hills. He could range where the stockier short-legged Herefords would have perished in the snowdrifts.

He was lean and tough and stringy. He was quick on his feet and ever watchful. His neck and shoulders bore the deep scars of claw marks. Three years before, a mountain lion had jumped him, only to be hurled off by his quick side leap. A sweep of the wide-curved bayonet-sharp horns had gored the great tawny cat to death.

A year later, in the early springtime, Longhorn had outfaced and driven off a cinnamon bear, ravenous from its winter fast. This spring, though a trifle less quick than in his young days, he was as strong and courageous as ever, and even more tough and stringy.

Several times during the winter Lobo and Two-Toes had crossed the old steer's trail. But they had passed him by. His gaunt bones promised poor picking. Why should they risk his wicked horns while more tender game was left in the hills?

One after another, they had hunted out and pulled down the other renegade steers. The big animals offered a spice of danger in the midst of the tamer sport of pulling down defenseless calves and drift-trapped deer.

But with the melting of the snows deer no longer floundered in the drifts, and the spring round-up of the Bar X and Broken Box Y brought their cattle close under the rifles of the range riders. The time came when Lobo and Two-Toes saw the suns of four days go down without a kill.

On the morning of the fifth day they were ravenous enough to have tackled a bear. They set off in search of old Longhorn. The spring grass, though short, was thick on the sunny slopes. Their quarry had not grazed far from where they had last scented him.

Hunger served only to sharpen the craftiness of the gray hunters. The steer was no timid calf or fawn to be hazed and jumped in an open rush. At the first glimpse of his gaunt red bulk through the feathery foliage of the chico, Lobo flattened and slunk off down-wind.

TWO-TOES did not crouch or slink. She walked quietly toward Longhorn until his snort and up-tossed head told her she had been discovered. Bare as were the washboard ribs of the old steer, the she-wolf's jowls slavered at thought of the feast inside those big downward arched bones.

But she did not rush. Hers was the age-old feminine rôle of decoy. She began to prance and play like a cub, slowly drawing nearer. Longhorn had seen many a young wolf in sportive mood, but never a scarred old she-wolf whose bristles had been whitened by the frostings of many winters.

He stood staring at her cublike gambols, suspicious, alert, yet overcome with curiosity. Had she threatened, he would have charged. The slightest sign that her mate was near would have sent him whirling about to protect his flanks in the nearest corner of rocks.

Lobo gave no sign. Many a time he had crept up on a jackrabbit with the stealthiness of a coyote. His big paws touched the soft earth like velvet upon velvet. His broad shoulders slipped between the scraggly chico branches without the snapping of a twig. He kept down-wind from the outreached dilated nostrils of the steer.

Playfully Two-Toes whirled around,

snapping at her tail. At each turn she came still a little nearer to the staring steer. Curiosity overcame his wariness. He started to walk toward the locoed she-wolf, ready to lower his head and charge.

He stopped to paw the sod. The irritation of perplexity had begun to mingle with his curiosity. He put down his head to charge. Out of the chico, opposite his left flank, shot a gray streak.

Silent even at the moment of attack, Lobo leaped across, close behind the heels of the steer. As he flashed past, his slashing teeth hamstrung one of the long legs.

The snorting steer whirled. His wounded leg gave way. He all but pitched over on his side. As he staggered, Two-Toes bounded in even more skillfully than her mate. She slashed the tendon of the other hind leg.

After that the rest was simple. Unable to stand upright, Longhorn went down on his haunches. Two-Toes and Lobo leaped in and out from behind, tearing at his flanks. He could not slue himself around quickly enough to catch them with the frantic sweeps of his horns.

His bellowings and the clash of wolf fangs on his bones were the only sounds of the hopeless death struggle. Two-Toes and Lobo had long since learned to make their kills with as little noise as possible.

As they tore at their victim they feasted on his quivering tissues. They were wolves and hungry. They had almost devoured their fill before Longhorn's head flattened down upon the torn sod and the last moan rumbled in his throat.

For the first time in months the pair did not run miles away from their kill as soon as they had feasted. They knew that Longhorn was the last of the abandoned Circle H steers. They knew they had also killed out all the less fleet and wary deer and elk in the hills around.

Past experience told them that the spring round-ups on the neighboring ranges would keep all cattle under close guard for a few days more. It also told them that the range riders would be too busy to come roaming through the Caratopis with their murderous roaring-sticks that could bite wolves from a long way off.

Of their earlier winter kills on the Circle H, both of beef and venison, bears had scavenged every scrap of food not already stripped off by coyotes and smaller hunters.

So the wise pair ventured to linger near Longhorn, driving off the coyotes and keeping ceaseless watch against the chance approach of human hunters. The hills were basking in an unusually warm spell of early April weather. Within two days even the stringiest, toughest muscles of the carcass began to soften.

On the third day the steadily strengthening odor from the carcass brought a huge she-bear lumbering upwind. At sight of the absurdly small cubs that frisked behind her, Lobo and Two-Toes abandoned the carcass to her without even a show of fight.

A run of several days to the southeast won them only two cotton-tail rabbits and a sage hen. When they returned to the hills they found that a concourse of crows and coyotes had cleaned up what the she-bear had left. All of the steer that remained were the long horns, the tail tuft, some scraps of hide, and the bones.

CHAPTER IV

THE season was more advanced on the Western Slope than around Denver. Spring had greened all the range along the Caratopi Hills when the Fosters drove up to the Clement ranch in a heavily loaded chuck wagon.

Homesteaders had fenced in the lower waterholes of the Broken Box Y, the same as those of the Circle H. The restricted range had become overstocked, and Big Bill Clement's notes at the bank amounted to more than the present market value of all his cattle. He was only too glad to pay off the remainder of his debt to the Circle H in cows, especially as the deal included a cash payment by young Foster for additional stockers.

But he was a fair-minded man. Before handing over the bill-of-sale and accepting Jim's check, he paused to give warning.

"Sure you know what you're biting off, boy? You might do better by hanging onto your money."

"No, sir. You've given me a bargain on those cows, not counting the half dozen early calves. I can't lose out this season, even if the beef market stays down."

"Can't, heh?" Big Bill rolled his quid. "Reckon you ain't heard about that old lobo and his two-toed she-devil mate."

"You mean the pair that took twenty per cent of the Bar X stock?"

"Uh-huh—not counting the loss to other outfits. Last fall Parley Brent's men made

things too hot for 'em. Seems they shifted over to the Circle H. Must have been there ever since Dad trailed out. Plenty of deer and elk in the hills, and you boys likely missed some of Dad's steers in your last round-up."

"Yes, sir. Easy enough to've left half a hundred or so, way they hid out and lay low in the scrub."

Big Bill spat his disgust.

"Damn them gray devils! They started to make their rounds over here right after you went to Denver. The Lord only knows how many of my calves they've pulled down. Parley Brent told me they've even had the gall to sneak back to the Bar X for at least two runs. They're getting worse all the time. Far as we can figure out, they make a kill every two or three days."

"Getting finicky in their old age," suggested Jim. "Bound to have their meat warm."

"Not as I see it," differed the cowman. "A wolf ain't like a mountain lion. He'll eat reasonably fresh meat, even if it ain't just killed—though he don't crave it after it gets rotten, like a dog or bear does. Only this lobo and his two-toed mate, they've been hunted too long to ever double on their tracks. They never go back to a kill, and their next one is always pulled down miles away. That's why they kill so often—that and sheer devilishness."

"Well, what's it got to do with this deal, Mr. Clement?"

"Matter enough. You say you aim to make out by running the Circle H all by your lonesome. No wages for riders."

"Molly can sit a horse."

"Heap of good that'll do you. You'll need half a dozen men that can shoot; else you can count on losing two-three calves a week. What do you suppose the Association has put three hundred dollars a head for on that pair of killers?"

"I'm not such a poor shot myself, Mr. Clement. That three hundred a head sounds good to me. At present prices, six will pay for quite a bunch of calves."

Big Bill signed his name to the papers.

"All right, Jim. It's on you. Only don't count too much on that six hundred. Brent's riders and the other outfits over south tried for four years to collect on them slick old lobos; and a government hunter joined in with us this winter. He quit three weeks ago."

Jim Foster took this soberly.

"I know what I'm up against, Mr. Clement. Last year I heard a whole lot from one of the Bar X boys about those gray devils. But I promised Mr. Horton to keep the Circle H going, and I can't afford to hire riders. It's up to Molly and me to do the best we can alone."

The older man offered a hearty hand.

"You've got the grit, Jim. Here's hoping you make a go of it."

Little time was lost in transferring the purchases of cattle. With the round-up herd still together on the bunching ground, Clement's men had only to start fires and heat the branding irons brought by the Fosters. Two hundred and fifty cows were seared with the Circle H, under the old Broken Box Y brand.

As much to give his new neighbors a boost as to relieve his overstocked range, Big Bill loaned a pair of riders for the first day's drive. That evening, outside the south drift fence of the Broken Box Y, Jim helped the two old punchers restretch the cut wires. In return they rode night herd for him.

After the dawn breakfast the pair patted Baby May and crawled through the fence to ride back the fifteen miles to their home ranch. Jim and Molly were left to drive their herd as best they could without help.

Fortunately the cows were all Herefords and had been partly winter fed. Their short legs and heavy frames did not favor running. They had come through the winter almost fat, and the grass was good along the trail route advised by Bill Clement.

Molly zigzagged the chuck wagon across the rear of the drive, to keep laggards moving. Her husband circled around, from side to side, to press in the scattering animals and keep the leaders headed.

Though Molly wished to get settled in the old ranch house that was now to be their own home, she did not urge Jim to hurry the drive. They were satisfied to let the herd graze-drift along the valley benchlands at half the usual trail pace.

The weather continued fair and warm. After being cooped up for months in the city, it was a joy to sleep on the ground, under the wagon bed. Molly thought nothing of taking turn about with Jim, night-riding the herd.

Noon of the third day found them past all nester homesteads and well in on the

Circle H range. But Jim had decided to lie out the third night. He felt an irresistible urge to drive the herd all the way to the ranch house before turning it adrift.

That would clinch the almost unbelievable fact of his and Molly's good fortune. It would enable them fully to realize that they were the actual owners of the old Circle H.

CHAPTER V

IN none too good humor, Lobo and Two-Toes trotted away from the gnawed and shattered bones of Longhorn, aslant the lower range. The last pickings of gristle had not been satisfactory even to their wolf stomachs.

The moon rose as they neared the old log ranch buildings. Lobo would have circled past, down-wind. But to Two-Toes there was a vague fascination about the deserted dens of the terrible creatures that walked on two legs.

Twice she had visited the place during the winter, when all lay white under a thick blanket of snow. The tongue of a drift had thrust in through the doorway of that deliciously odorous cave where they had heard the porcupine gnawing.

But neither familiarity nor curiosity now lessened her extreme wariness. She prowled at a safe distance until eyes and ears and nose all told her that the man-dens were as empty and deserted as ever. Then, still on the alert for the slightest sign of danger, she crept in close.

Not even a porcupine disturbed the grave-like stillness of the ranch. The snowdrift in the stable doorway had melted. For the first time Two-Toes ventured inside. Though so many months old, the lingering scents of horse and cow and man were to her nostrils like rich drinks to the palate of a human. She breathed in her fill of the odors.

The shut-in place was doubly desirable to her. The time was near for her to find a den.

Before Lobo was able to entice her away, the night had so advanced that barely time enough was left to make the run to the Broken Box Y before morning. Lobo led at a speed that Two-Toes found hard to match. His shrunken white belly craved to be gorged with tender calf meat. His old teeth ached from the gnawing of Longhorn's hard bones.

Yet once started away from the ranch, Two-Toes was no less eager to get forward with their hunting. She had more cause than her mate to feel ravenous. And owing to her condition, she was also even more on the alert.

Less than an hour's lope from the man-dens she caught the faintest of faint scents across the moist night breeze. It was so very faint that even Lobo's super-keen nose missed the whiff. None the less he knew his mate too well to doubt her craft. The low whine she gave him promised game. He followed her sudden swerve from the line of their run.

Before long he, too, caught the cattle scent. Two-Toes had not turned aside for a mere rabbit, nor even for deer. The scent rapidly grew richer and stronger. Their swift lope was bringing them, not to a stray cow or steer, nor even to a scattered bunch, but to a compact herd.

Growing realization of the fact slowed their rush as they neared the source of the powerful odor. A bedded herd meant riders on guard. The moon shone clear and bright over the open ground. Two-Toes sought cover in the willows of the little creek down which Jim and Molly had made their third night's camp.

Slower and slower she led the way, her nose down-stretched to detect the scent of men or traps, her sharp ears cocked forward to take in every slightest sound. She stole through the bushes, soft-footed as a cat, silent as a ghost. After her glided Lobo, equally noiseless and crafty.

A light unlike the white moonbeams glowed through the thicket. Two-Toes crept up to peer over the edge of the creek gully.

Out in the midst of a wide meadow lay the bedded cows of the new Circle H herd. Between stood the chuck wagon, only a few yards from the creek bank.

Molly Foster had come in from her second spell of night-riding the herd. She had started to warm the coffeepot for Jim at the camp fire, while he picketed her horse with the others and saddled his own.

The stir wakened little May. She rolled out from the bed under the wagon, her chubby fists in her eyes. The firelight shone through her tousled yellow curls, turning them into red gold.

A few steps away, under the black shadow of the willow thicket, Two-Toes' yellow-green eyes also took on a red glint

in the firelight. But it was the glare of blood lust. Saliva drooled from her quivering lips. Her empty stomach yearned with a great craving.

Never before had she been so close to a man-cub. The thing looked softer than a young rabbit, far more helpless than a newborn calf. It was fat and juicy. Its meat would be more tender than a fawn's.

But the first of the only two laws of her being—the basic law of self-preservation—warned her that the temptingly delicious man-cub was too dangerous for her to touch.

She and Lobo, thanks to their superlative craft and cunning and wisdom, had for years eaten the cattle of men and escaped all their traps and poison and roaring-sticks. Yet she knew the fury that each year doubled her ferocity at the least threat of harm to her suckling cubs. Instinct now told her that the devouring of a man-cub would make the terrible two-legged killers no less furious.

BABY May had faced away from the dazzling firelight toward the creek. She lowered her hands. Suddenly their tiny palms clapped together, and there sounded an interested gurgle.

Even quicker than Molly, Jim glimpsed the two pairs of fiery eyes glaring in the blackness of the willows. He jerked his rifle from its saddle sheath—but the points of light had vanished.

"Don't shoot," said Molly. "It might stampede the herd."

Jim lowered his rifle.

"I wonder. They looked too wide apart for coyotes' eyes. Besides, coyotes wouldn't have the gall to come so near. I've heard of mountain lions creeping up that way—only you never see them down so low, this time of year."

Though range bred, Molly caught up the baby in her sheltering arms.

"It may be that pair of gray wolves Mr. Clement warned us about. They're wise to a gun."

By way of reply, Jim swung into his saddle and started off to circle the herd. He rode round and round the sleeping cattle, humming a song to keep them lulled. As he sang, his eyes kept sharp watch of the tree clumps on the border of the meadow. His rifle lay ready between his thighs and the saddlehorn.

But no gray killers crept out into the moonlight to leap upon the young calves. Jim did not even catch another glimpse of glaring eyes under the trees.

At daybreak, when the herd rose from the bedding ground and started to graze, he rode around to the wagon. Molly had lighted the breakfast fire and was mixing a batter of flapjacks. The coffeepot stood empty.

"If you'll fetch a pailful," she asked.

Jim leaped down into the gully, swinging the galvanized bucket. On the previous evening the soft earth along the creek edge had been trampled and churned to mud by the crossing herd. As he bent over to dip the pail in the stream he saw two sets of dog-like footprints between the mud holes.

At his call Molly set her pan of bacon off the fire and ran down to him. He pointed to the prints in the mud.

"You guessed it, girl. Wolf tracks—whopping big ones. And look at this print of the left forepaw—only two toes showing. No mistake. It's the pair of old lobos that ate such a hole in the Bar X herd."

"Oh, Jim, our calves! Perhaps we'd better take Mr. Clement's advice—hire three or four good shots."

"No. What few dollars we've got left we'll need for our grub-stake. The banks won't loan a cent now on cattle. They're in too deep already. No. I can shoot as good as some. If those gray devils try any funny business on the Circle H, we'll see who wins. Six hundred dollars buys a big bunch of calves."

CHAPTER VI

AS if the threat had reached the sharp ears of the gray killers and struck terror into their fierce hearts, a week passed—two weeks—without the loss of a single Circle H calf.

Instead of the first calves going, new ones began to arrive—stocky little pledges of prosperity. Not a scrub among them. All were sons or daughters of Big Bill Clement's pure-bred prize bulls.

In its most prosperous days the Circle H range had grazed more than five thousand head of cattle. The home ranch alone was amply large enough for the quarter-thousand cows of the new herd. By hard riding every day, Jim and Molly had kept the animals bunched near the ranch as closely as if in pasture.

At the end of the second week came a late spring blizzard that threatened to do worse for the calves than any pair of wolves. When the storm swooped down over the hills, Molly raced out to help her husband. Desperate work, at the risk of frozen feet and hands, finally succeeded in heading the herd into the shelter of the big old corral and feed sheds.

When the brief icy gale blew itself out and the blazing sun of a hot wave set the drifts to sinking, Jim opened the bars of the corral and made tally of the out-pouring herd. The count totaled seven cows and two calves short.

He rode south in line with the blizzard's drive. The first gullies were shallow. He came to a deeper ravine. At the bottom he found the seven cows and one of the calves, fast in a snowdrift. They had dropped over the steep bank in a bunch, and the blizzard had buried them with its swirling drive.

One after another Jim roped the animals, and his bronco pulled them clear of the drift. The calf had been crushed or smothered. One cow had broken a leg. He put her out of misery with a shot from his automatic, headed the survivors back toward the ranch house, and rode on in search of the other calf.

The lone wanderer—one of the older calves—must have become separated from its mother on the side of the herd opposite the bunch of other strays. It had struck a break in the ravine bank farther down. Jim covered more than two miles before he found what was left of the animal.

Fast as the snow was melting, it still showed clearly the big wolf footprints that told how the calf had died. There was only one set of prints, and none had been made by the mutilated left forepaw of the two-toed she-wolf.

Jim was quick to draw his conclusions.

"It's the he-lobo—hunting alone. That accounts for their passing us up all this time. Two-Toes must have holed-in for her litter. My ante, if only I can track him to their den! It's the chance of a lifetime!"

He started to trail the killer, certain of success. Beyond question, the old lobo had first gorged himself. But what surprised and gratified Jim was the proof that the beast had dragged off some of the softer parts. The reddened mark in the soft snow could be followed at a lope.

But on the far side of the next big drift both drag-mark and tracks came to a sudden end. Easy enough to guess that the wolf had either eaten the food or else taken it up in his jaws. No less easy to account for the disappearance of the tracks.

The low ridge that ran out eastward from the foot of the Caratopis was crested with a rocky spine. The drive of the blizzard had swept the ledges bare of snow. Even a common dog could have run along the rocky way and left no trail visible to the eye.

Jim knew that the ridge headed in one of the craggiest parts of the hills. He reined his horse around and slanted across to the ranch.

The six stray cows had already legged back to rejoin the herd. Molly met her husband's glum report with a smile.

"Only a cow and two calves, yet a blizzard like that!"

He shook his head.

"I'd rather have lost a dozen head, if it had only been the blizzard. You know you'd begun to count on it as much as me that those lobos had vamosed for good. Where's the needle-squirt and poison?"

On his way back he stopped to dress the first calf and the cow. The cowhide he took along to use as a mat when he dismounted beside the torn carcass of the second calf. Without so much as touching the body even with the tips of his gloved fingers, he jabbed the meat several times with the needle of his big hypodermic syringe. There was enough strychnine to kill a whole pack of wolves.

He remounted without stepping off the cowhide, which he drew up after him with the thong that he had cut along one edge. Little as green hides were worth on the market, he was throwing away nothing.

By evening he and Molly had all the beef and veal of the first cow and calf either in pickle or dry-curing over a smother fire. To kill stock for home consumption was against range custom. There were always deer or elk in the hills, if one wanted a change from ham or bacon. But beef inadvertently killed was not to be wasted. It would save several dollars.

At sunrise Jim rode out to the second calf. Crows were pecking at the carcass. He had heard that chickens could eat strychnine without being killed. Either crows were likewise immune or these feathered feasters had only started to eat.

Close search failed to disclose any signs that the lobo or his mate had come near the poisoned carcass. But there were many fresh tracks of coyotes. Jim circled around and found three bodies. No fox was more cunniug than these little wolves. To have out-tricked them proved his skill.

This, however, gave him scant satisfaction. He had failed to get the big lobo or his mate. What use to poison their kill with utmost care if they would not return to eat it? He did not stop to take the pelts of the coyotes.

"Looks as if we're in for it, Molly," he wound up his account of the failure. "If that old gray devil is too wise to go back to a carcass, it means a lot more kills. Think how the pair slaughtered the Bar X cattle!"

"Now, Jim, you keep a stiff upper lip. This is a different deal. I'm going to ride, well as you. With so much good grass we can keep the herd pretty well bunched during the day, and we can bed them down nights just like on trail."

Such talk would have put backbone into a jelly-fish, and Jim was a sound, normal range-bred young man. He took Molly up on her proposal.

Spring was now well advanced. They had nothing to face in the way of bad weather except an occasional cold rain. The chuck wagon was equipped and driven out to where the herd had grazed away from the ranch buildings.

The first day and night passed without event. On the second day one of the cows, with the instinct of her kind, hid out in the scrub. Dawn of the third day Jim heard her frantic bellowing. He spurred his bronco into a dead run.

As he came racing to the thicket-filled gully he saw a big gray-white form bound over the ridge on the far side. He jerked his horse up on its haunches and fired—a fraction of a second too late.

DOWN in the gully he found the cow hamstrung. Her new-born calf had been dragged several feet away. The killer had lacked time to more than begin his gorge. Yet the smeared foliage along his line of flight showed that he had carried off some of the food.

No use trying to trail the crafty old devil. Jim cursed him and shot the mutilated cow. She had been worth sixty dollars—and there was the calf, to boot. Worse still, beyond all doubt, the slaughter had now begun in earnest.

Molly hauled the cow beef down creek to the nearest group of nesters. She brought back its value in grain and other supplies raised by the farmers. So far so good. But the dead calf, loaded with poison, failed to bring them in anything more than a coyote and a skunk.

Only two days passed before Lobo struck again. This time the loss was not so great. He stalked one of the oldest calves, which had wandered out of sight of its mother. The kill was made so quietly that not even the cow heard the struggle.

Molly, helping to round in the herd to the bedding ground, was first to find the calf. She also discovered why the kill had been so noiseless.

"Look at the bite here back of the ears, Jim. That lobo jumped him and slashed the spinal cord so quick the calf didn't have time even for one bawl."

"Never before heard of a wolf doing that, Molly. This old fellow must be a regular old devil. The gall of him! Slipped in right between us when we were circling the herd. It means for sure that Two-Toes has holed-in. He's desperate to rustle grub for her."

CHAPTER VII

MORE than once in her long wolf life Two-Toes had come near to famine. Yet seldom had she felt more ravenously hungry than during the days since the coming of her last cubs.

A full litter of nine had from the first made heavy demand upon her supply of milk. At the beginning Lobo stayed fairly close to her lair in the rocks and brought her only wild meat—rabbits and sage hens and pine grouse.

Poor hunting in the hills sent him ranging down with the blizzard into the lower Circle H. Such parts of the calves as he could bring her were choice to her palate, but lacking in quantity.

Many humans, judging by what they knew about other wolves, would have disputed Jim Foster's belief that the lobo was carrying meat to his mate. Now and then, however, a wolf differs from and rises above the average of his kind even as a few dogs possess intelligence far above others of their breed.

But Lobo either could not or would not

carry food enough to satisfy his mate. Hunger at last drove her out to hunt while he stayed at home to guard the cubs. By sheer luck she stumbled upon an elk calf whose mother had gone off to feed.

Nature has provided elk calves with the defense that they give off no scent while lying still. This calf lay so motionless and well hidden that Two-Toes neither smelled nor saw nor heard it. The slightest swerve to right or left would have carried her past, all unaware of the meat she had missed.

In the hope of flushing a rabbit, she leaped through a bush—and landed full upon the elk calf. Automatically her fangs slashed at the living thing that quivered under the shock of her weight. The calf did not even have time to scramble up on its wobbly legs.

Two-Toes returned to her whimpering cubs, for the first time in weeks gorged to her utmost wolfish capacity. The cubs snarled and fought with puny ferocity over the half-digested meat she regurgitated for them.

The elk calf gave the Circle H herd respite for a week. Then Two-Toes made a dash out of the hills with Lobo. When they trotted home again the herd was short another calf.

But the old pair were too wise and wary to push their luck. Day and night, one or both of the human mates rode herd. To take chances too often against so close a guard might mean disaster. Wild game was harder to kill but far less dangerous to hunt.

Lobo would have continued to avoid the bunched herd until the riders became less alert. But Two-Toes had her fast-growing litter to feed. Coyotes and the smaller killers had made small game scarce, and both deer and elk were now hard to surprise or run down.

Two-Toes led another raid on the Circle H. This time they chanced upon an unusually active young cow. As a matter of course, they hamstrung her and killed the calf. Only, during the short struggle, one of Lobo's forelegs was ripped to the bone by the tip of the cow's horn.

Molly happened to be nearest to the thicket whence came the bawls of the cow. Instead of riding direct, she circled around to the side opposite Jim. He rode straight at the thicket.

The killers sighted the man in ample time to make their escape. But the woman was down-wind from them and kept behind the cover of the thickets. They lingered beside the calf, devouring the tender food as fast as their voracious jaws could rend it apart.

Lobo was the first to run. With the audacity of long experience, Two-Toes waited until she knew the barest margin of safety was left for her to get away. She gained upon Lobo—forged past him.

His torn leg had given way. He was running on the other three. The handicap lessened his usual speed only a little. He had already come within a jump of the next thicket when something bit through his ear and tore forward along the top of his head. As he bounded into the bushes he heard the angry cry of the man's roaring-stick.

Through the thicket and out the other side he dashed, faster than before. Two-Toes had slowed a trifle among the bushes. She was loping along only a few bounds ahead of him.

From off to one side hornets came zipping. He saw Two-Toes leap and snap at her shoulder as if stung. He heard the booming cry of a different roaring-stick. At the same instant it bit him in the neck and thigh, and roared again. Both he and Two-Toes yelped and burst into the top speed of frantic panic.

Had the young woman at the other end of the old double-barreled shotgun been a few yards nearer, the Circle H would have collected six hundred dollars from the Cattlemen's Association. She had shot straight.

Luckily for Lobo and Two-Toes the distance had been too great. The buckshot scattered wide. Such few as struck their mark barely pierced through hair and hide into the tough muscles of the old wolf mates.

But the effect upon them went deeper than the wounds. For the first time in years they had blundered into an ambush. Had the woman been nearer, or had she carried the other kind of roaring-stick, one or both of them would have been bitten to death. It was time to shift their hunting grounds.

They at last came limping up the bare ledges to their den in the rocks. Lobo stretched out in the sun to lick his torn leg, and bite at the hornet that had buried itself in his thigh.

Two-Toes went in to nurse her cubs and feed them on disgorged meat. They were

still very young for travel. She and Lobo could take turns running over the divide, down into the range of the Bar X, and back. Or if Lobo were too disabled, she could forage for them all while he guarded the cubs.

One thing certain, the Circle H was for a while no place to hunt calves. Nor was it a place to live. As the sun mounted to mid-sky a warning snarl from Lobo brought her to the cave mouth. She peered out past him.

Far down the ridge the Circle H man, afoot, was slowly working his way up the blood trail left by Lobo's torn leg. Two-Toes took no chances. She started to move her litter.

When Jim Foster at last reached the head of the ridge, the blood trail that he had so painstakingly followed came to an end on the ledge before the wolf den. He crawled into the cave, and found it empty.

CHAPTER VIII

A FULL month without loss of a single calf convinced Jim and Molly that they had driven off the gray killers for good. They returned to the ranch house and gave up riding herd at night. Even during the daytime Molly permitted Jim to do most of the riding.

She busied herself with her neglected housework and her hardly less neglected baby. Out on the range little May had spent most of the days picketed to the chuck wagon.

Though a sweet tempered child, she had become very active in the pure air of the open range. Every day found her stronger and able to crawl and scramble an amazing distance. Molly realized that, owing to their short handed condition on the ranch, the child would have to be much alone, so let her make her own way many times even when her own heart was in her throat. Flowers fascinated the child. She began to crawl away from the house to clutch as many as her little hands could hold.

Another month and still another passed without a sign of the old lobos. With the help of Molly and their nester neighbors, Jim had already cut and hauled in the first crop of alfalfa from the big field planted by Dad Horton. He made hay of the meadow grass until late summer brought the second cutting of alfalfa. There would be ample winter feed for the herd.

During the heaviest part of the hay harvest the cows were permitted to range at will. Two or three calves were pulled down by coyotes; but most of the cow mothers proved well able to protect their young from the small wolves.

Little May was now very strong and active, and in pursuit of flowers could cover a surprising distance. So far she had always obeyed her mother and kept to the stretch of level ground that lay open to view from the ranch house. But with the withering of the prairie flowers came temptation. Down in the bush-shaded gully of the spring rill and the tree-edged larger gully of the creek flowers still bloomed.

ONE day from the edge of the bank she looked down where the spring rill flowed into the creek and saw a tiger lily. The brilliant red lure proved irresistible. She lay on her tummy and slid down the bank.

An hour or two later Molly failed to see the child in the open or to find her around the ranch buildings. She flung a saddle on her bronco and galloped off in alarmed search.

She found little May under a scrub oak in the creek gully. One dimpled fist was choking the tiger lily, the other was rubbing the tearful blue eyes.

Molly could make nothing of her gibberish, but she seemed to be saying something about a "nice doggie." That night the child threw her father into a spasm of laughter by suddenly wrinkling up her little nose and baring all her tiny teeth.

"Why, May!" reproved Molly. "It's not nice to make faces."

May repeated the grimace, and again gurgled something about a dog.

Jim grinned.

"She's sure her dad's daughter. They say I told whoppers when I was her age."

"No, your mother said you were five or six. May is too young for—" Molly's eyes widened. "I wish you'd go and look."

Night had set in. At sunrise Molly took Jim out to where she had found the child. Along the creek edge the soft sand bore four or five sets of small dog-like footprints. Some of them were partly blotted out by deeper tracks. Of these huge prints, that of the left forefoot showed only two toes.

Jim's sunburnt face glistened with cold sweat.

"God!" he whispered. "Dogs! Not

coyotes—that damned she-wolf and her pups!"

"But—but, Jim—they didn't touch her!"

"Probably glutted on one of our calves. And baby—the human smell. That two-toed old she-devil must be mighty wise."

An odd fancy brightened Molly's eyes with the tear-glistening tender radiance of wonder and gratitude.

"She's a mother herself, Jim. Maybe—maybe she went by because it was only a baby."

"Because!" Jim burst into a harsh laugh. "You can bet your boots she just dotes on babies. Easy to kill and tender meat! No; it was the human smell. That shied her off—that and a full glut. I'm going to see."

Less than a mile down the creek he found a dead calf and a full record of tracks. The chain of evidence was complete. Two-Toes had come back to the Circle H with her big mate and four of their half-grown cubs. They had killed the calf and joined in a family feast. The male lobo had then left the others and gone up a dry fork of the creek gully.

For the second time Jim wiped cold sweat from his face. The he-wolf probably was a trifle bolder, a trifle less cautious than his mate. No telling what would have happened if he had gone with the others up the creek to where Baby May sat playing with her tiger lily.

Jim looked at the torn carcass of the calf and cursed. The fact that his baby had not been killed and devoured failed to soften his anger. On the contrary, the deadliness of the danger to which she had been subjected hardened his anger into the bitter hate of fear.

The killers had come back. They had begun again to slaughter his cattle. Only by a freak of chance had they failed to kill his baby girl. All right. He would show the gray devils. He would not let up until he had got them both—and their pups, to boot.

The feud was on. Molly and two nester neighbors continued with the mowing and curing and stacking of the second stand of alfalfa. Through the day Baby May was kept tethered to the post nearest where her mother happened to be working.

Jim spent his time in the saddle, riding range from dawn until dark. He worked the cows in nearer to the ranch, rounded up all the strays he could find, and did his utmost to shield his herd from the killers.

He might as well have joined in the hay harvest and allowed his cows to drift. Every two days, or at the most, three, he found a slaughtered calf. The only consolation was that the cows were now less solicitous over the protection of their calves, and the calves more apt to wander off alone. Few cows were hamstrung.

But Jim knew that their turn would come later, when the supply of calves ran out. With hands wrapped in raw calf skin still soft from the kill, he set blind traps up the stony ridge that led to the old den. He squirted every carcass full of strychnine. He spent hours crawling up banks and ridges to peer over in search of the gray killers.

The poison brought him only a few coyotes. But during the second week one of the gray wolf cubs stepped into a trap. Two days later Jim found a second one fast in the steel jaws of another trap. They probably had ventured to hunt alone; or the male lobo, grown irascible with age, may have driven them off.

The good luck, such as it was, came all in a bunch. Only a few days later Jim peered through the spikes of a yucca on a ridge top and surprised the two remaining lobo cubs devouring a rabbit. He shot both before they could dash into cover.

He had wiped out what remained of old Two-Toes' last litter before they had learned her cunning. The devilish brood would not grow up to help slaughter his cattle.

His exultance was short lived. Loss of their cubs did not frighten away the old lobos. They kept on taking toll of the herd—a calf every second or third day.

Completion of the hay harvest set Molly free to help her husband ride herd. Enough alfalfa and hay had been cut and cured and stacked to feed their livestock through the winter months. They equipped the chuck wagon and went back to the plan of close grazing and night-bedding the herd.

Their redoubled watchfulness won a partial success. The killings were reduced to an average of only one calf a week. The lobo mates hunted with utmost craft and caution. There could be no doubt that they spied on the riders, for their kills were made only at the rare times when circumstances compelled Jim and Molly to be off guard.

By mid-fall, between anxiety and hard

riding, Molly had grown thin and sad-eyed. Jim became silent and morose. Like Molly, the strain had got on his nerves. The reduction in the number of kills was no cure of their trouble. It merely prolonged the period during which they were being stripped of their chances for future prosperity and happiness.

The long hours of watching, day after day and night after night, in vain effort to surprise the lobos, embittered Jim's natural good temper. Every finding of a mangled calf deepened his rancor more and more, until he was hating the gray killers with a malignancy almost equal to their own.

Baby May alone enjoyed life. She had all night to sleep in the now tilt-covered wagon and all day to play around it to the length of her picket rope. Very few posies still bloomed, but there were always pretty pebbles to collect or fascinating seeds or grass tops to be pulled off.

The growing moroseness of Jim frightened Molly. In the ranch house was an old copy of a sportsmen's magazine published in Denver. Molly wrote to the editor, telling about the murderous lobo pests of the Circle H.

WITHIN two weeks the editor himself and three fellow big game hunters appeared at the ranch. With them they brought a pack of trained dogs—seven trailers and three big Russian wolfhounds.

Jim and Molly gave the visitors a camp barbecue of wolf-killed veal, and Jim rode out with them at dawn. By sunrise the dogs were in full cry on the fresh trail of the lobos. It led up into the crags and canyons of the Caratopi Hills; it turned south over the divide and down into the Bar X range.

At noon the out-distanced hunters heard the yelping of the dogs across the ridge on their left. The lobos had doubled back for the Circle H. Late afternoon found the party over again on the north side of the divide. Even Jim's tough bronco had given out. They headed for the camp.

Down near the old round-up road that skirted the border of the hills, they came upon a dead wolfhound. A short distance farther along lay another, with throat deep slashed.

Not for the first time had the old lobos been hunted with a pack. Their tireless wolf lope had kept them in the lead all day. Then, when the dogs tired, the crafty killers had at length shown themselves.

The wolfhounds, which ran only by sight, had dashed ahead of their short-legged trailer mates. That they had been no match for such powerful and crafty fighters as the huge old lobos, here were the bodies of two in sad proof. But the other hound?

The owner started to curse his loss. From down-trail came a feeble yelp. A little way farther on the hunters found the third wolfhound, mangled and dying. No dog could have lived long with such frightful wounds. Therefore both wolves and pack had passed within a very short time.

The owner blew his whistle to recall the survivors of the pack.

"Here's where we quit," he said. "To hell with your lobos! They're not wolves. They're devils!"

"You've said a mouthful," replied Jim. "They sure are devils. But God hates a quitter. I promised Dad Horton I'd stick on the Circle H. I'll get those killers, if it takes until they hamstring my last cow."

CHAPTER IX

SUCCESSFULLY as they had outrun and out-played the sportsmen and their pack, the adventure left a bad taste in the mouths of Lobo and Two-Toes.

Lobo's horn-ripped leg had long since healed, and the slight limp of Two-Toes' trap-mangled left forefoot never affected her speed or endurance. They could have kept on running for another day without a rest.

But they were getting old. Neither enjoyed a long run for the pleasure of the exercise. There was scant fun in such a chase. It had brought them no meat. Before they could devour the killed hounds—even before they could make certain that the third one was dead—the rest of the pack had come at them in a yelping bunch.

A full day's hard running, without meat at the end of it and with much danger all along the way, did not appeal to them. They had been forced to choose between running on into the dangerous Bar X range or doubling back into the Circle H, where riders might have been lurking behind any ridge, ready to shoot.

The fact that they had been lucky enough to avoid this last danger did not add relish to the prospect of another chase. The accumulated wisdom of their years of

experience sent them trotting westward into the forests of the high mountains back of the Caratopis.

Here for a time they found game plentiful. Frequent snows forced the deer down from timberline. But with the onset of winter, most of the bands drifted away to the lower valleys.

A pair of mountain lions came to share the few deer that lingered. The great tawny cats slaughtered game even more wantonly than Two-Toes and Lobo. Between the four of them, all the deer that remained were soon killed or frightened away.

The cougars went up into the mountains to harry the bands of bighorn. Lobo and Two-Toes shifted back to the Caratopi Hills.

Their lust for calf meat was as strong as ever, and hunting did not prove very good in the hills. They made a Christmas reconnoiter of the Circle H ranch. Nowhere could they find the suspicion of a dog scent, and nowhere a trace of cow or calf at large.

The herd had been penned for the winter in the great feed corral. The hay and alfalfa stacks stood alongside the sheds. A ditch, plowed from the spring rill, kept running water in the troughs at the lower corner of the corral. The sheds provided shelter against blizzards. The corral was so large that the herd could mill around for exercise. No need for the bars to be let down before spring.

From their cover in the gully of the spring rill the crafty hunters watched the man go out from his smoke-plumed den and fork hay into the feed sheds. He made noises like the birds.

The man-cub ran out to him, waving her hands. He played with her—tossed her high in the air. He had lost his fierce look. But on his hip hung his short roaring-stick.

Small chance for a calf at this time. Yet Two-Toes lingered to watch the man-cub. It was a delicious morsel. Lobo's uneasiness at last forced her to go with him.

They fasted for a week, with no more than a snowshoe rabbit to stay their hunger. Then a blizzard swept over the Caratopis. In the thick of its swirling icy drive, they drifted down to the ranch.

The corral fence was high. But famine gave added strength to their wonderful stringy muscles. They leaped the top rail. The corral was down-wind from the house. The howl and roar of the blizzard muffled the commotion among the cattle.

Lobo and Two-Toes killed a calf. Its mother attacked them. They hamstrung her. By the time they had glutted themselves on the calf they were so heavy that they could not leap the fence.

The feeling that they were trapped cowed all their ferocity. They slunk along the corral fence like scared coyotes. Twice Lobo almost throttled himself, trying to force his big head through small openings. Two-Toes was first to find the gate. She slipped between the sapling bars and bolted for the hills at top speed.

By morning their tracks had been buried deep under the powdery snow. But their work was unmistakable. When Jim found the cow and calf, all his half-forgotten rancor welled up again with renewed bitterness. He cursed with rage as he shot the mutilated cow.

Molly sought to calm him. She spoke of the months that had passed without loss to them. She suggested adding to the height of the corral and tightening the gate.

No use trying to trail killers that had left no trail. Jim fell in with her suggestion. Added bars made the gate wolf-proof. Husband and wife then stripped wire from the fence of the alfalfa field and built the corral a full two feet higher with the barbed strands.

"Reckon that will hold them till we let the herd out," said Jim.

Yet, certain that the lobos were back on the Circle H, he grimly set out to get them. Twice within ten days he followed their trails up spur ridges to the hills. They seemed to prefer running along under the crest ledges, where they could spy down into the gullies and lower ground for game and enemies.

He made blind sets of traps on several ridges. Some caught coyotes and one of them a bobcat. The others, one after another, were sprung empty. Marks of big paws showed how the crafty lobos had burrowed until they found the chains. In dragging the traps from cover they had jarred the pans and brought the steel jaws clashing together—harmlessly.

Jim reset the traps with poisoned bait. Meat had become very scarce in the hills. He gathered in four more coyotes and a lynx. The bait of two other traps was left untouched, but the traps were dug up

and sprung. It was as if, not content with out-playing him in craftiness, the gray mates were holding him up to derision.

His consolation was their failure to overcome the new defenses of the corral. They made the attempt in the next heavy snowstorm. As before, the snow buried their tracks long before morning. But on the barbed wires Jim found bits of gray-white fur that proved the hungry pair had tried more than once to leap the fence.

DURING the early part of February a spell of almost Polar cold gripped the ranges in a frozen clutch. Famine overtook the wild hunters of the hills. All except a very little game had been killed off or had drifted down the valleys to better feeding grounds.

Unable to leap into the Circle H corral, Lobo and Two-Toes managed to kill a coyote that was weak from famine. The scrawny carcass gave them no more than enough meat to whet their appetites.

They ventured south over the divide and killed a calf in the feed lot of the Bar X. But that big outfit had heard of the dog chase on the Circle H, and had bought a pack of their own.

The dogs ran the gray mates aslant the Caratopis and westward up into the high mountains. All were scent-trailers and they were too well trained to scatter out on the trail even when tired. Lobo and Two-Toes managed to shake off the pursuit only by losing their trail in the swift ice-fringed rapids of a mountain torrent.

A thaw near the end of February found them back on the Circle H. Famine had wasted their already lean bodies until they looked to be little more than skin-bound skeletons. Their bellies were all up-curve; their ribs stood out like washboards. Never in all their long lives had they been more gaunt or ravenous.

They had not come back to stay. The Circle H offered no promise of meat. They were headed for the Broken Box Y. But, in passing through, the bare possibility of a chance drew them within sight of the ranch and corral.

The mid-afternoon air was warm and balmy. Most of the snow left by the last cold snap had already melted off the level ground. The famished mates turned out of the creek bed to steal up the smaller gully of the spring rill.

The smell of the cattle made their grinning jaws drool. They were fairly desperate from extreme hunger. Had a cow or horse been out loose, they would have dashed into the open and stampeded the animal away from the man-dens.

But every head of stock was barred off from them. All live creatures around the man-dens were safe in shelter. No—one larger than a fawn but smaller than a young calf came crawling energetically toward the gully. It was the man-cub!

Lobo pricked forward even his bullet-tattered ear along with its mate, only to crouch and start to creep back. He had caught the human scent. He would have taken flight. Two-Toes stopped him with a low reassuring note.

The man-cub was coming toward them. The man and woman were nowhere in sight. If the man-cub should come to the bank and down into the gully the danger would be slight. They could eat and lope away, undiscovered.

The fierce craving of her famished stomach overcame the wisdom of the she-wolf's experience. What mattered the uttermost fury of the man when she was perishing for lack of meat? The man-cub would be the tenderest of meat. If only the foolish little creature would keep on down into the gully!

It passed a line of low bushes and stopped to play with a heap of mica-glittering quartz. Lobo and Two-Toes did not need to study the situation. They had already noted that the bushes offered partial cover against sight from the man-dens. The man-cub seemed very unwary. One of them could creep up and kill it like a fawn and drag the body down into the gully.

Lobo was no less ravenous than his mate. But he had been hurt worse and oftener by men. Two-Toes had to urge him before he accepted his usual rôle of stalker.

She waited until he had crept up into the bushes. She then peered over the bank directly in front of the man-cub, ready, if need be, to show herself and hold the attention of the man-cub with her playful gambols.

In the kitchen of the ranch house Molly chanced to glance through the glass of the little slide window. Her body went rigid. Her voice gasped out in a choking whisper:

"May! Jim—shoot!"

She darted toward the door. Jim had

been reading an old magazine. His first bound brought him in reach of his rifle on the elkhorn rack. The window glass shattered with the out-thrust of the muzzle.

Over the barrel he saw a gray-white form in the scraggle of bushes, not two lengths away from Baby May. He fired as Molly burst screaming from the doorway.

The gray-white stalker leaped high in the air, whirled over, and pitched down headlong. To the right, almost directly in line beyond the child, another gray-white form whisked from sight down into the gully. The first one had fallen limp, but Jim pumped two more bullets into it before he ran out after Molly.

They found May fondling the scarred head of a huge old lobo.

Molly caught her up as if the dead wolf were a rattlesnake. She hugged her so hard that the child cried out with pain.

Jim had bent over the gaunt body. He straightened up and whooped. He flung down his hat and jumped on it and yelled like a madman.

"Yeow! I've got him—got the he-devil! Yeow!"

CHAPTER X

TERROR winged the feet of Two-Toes. She had seen the frightful thing that had happened to Lobo; had heard his death yell, had seen his lifeless body plunge down from that skyward leap, even as she flung herself over into the gully.

She raced to the forks and sped on down the bed of the creek until far beyond rifle shot from the ranch. Her savage heart burned with malignant fury against the killer of her mate. But her panic fear was greater even than her fury. She ran on and on, never once slackening her flight until far over in the range of the Broken Box Y.

There, at last, she chanced to jump a cottontail rabbit. The taste of meat stilled her panic. The craving of her famine hunger put even the hate of the killer-man out of her one-track mind.

But the cattle of the Broken Box Y were so well guarded that wariness overcame her ravenous urge. She headed out eastward and tried the new adventure of prowling around the nester farms. The few milk cows of these lean humans were carefully kept fastened from harm in the log stables.

Driven desperate, Two-Toes pounced upon a flock of chickens that a woman was feeding. A fat dog chased her away. She loped off, not more than two jumps in the lead. When well out of sight from the farm house, she whirled upon her pursuer.

Fully gorged for the first time in weeks, she began a systematic circuit of the scattered nester homesteads. Though most proved barren to her, within the month she killed another dog, several chickens, two horses and a milch cow.

Some time after the first of April she came upon a flock of sheep—the first she had ever seen. Even the older animals were as soft and helpless as young calves. She leaped into their pen and, in one night, slaughtered fifteen of them from sheer blood lust.

But the time was near for her to find a den. The lower country held possibilities of unknown dangers to a litter of helpless cubs. With the returning spring, hunting might be good again in the hills. She headed back for her old haunts.

Passing the Circle H she found the herd out in the open and unguarded. Greatly as she had at first missed Lobo, he had already begun to fade from her wolf memory. Sight and smell of the man-dens where he had been killed reawakened all the malignancy that she had felt over his death.

When she passed on, she left a cow and three yearling calves dead and two cows hamstrung.

Upon his discovery of the animals, Jim Foster's own hatred told him the meaning of the wanton slaughter. He drove the herd back into the feed corral and set out to get the killer. A light snow offered good tracking. He circled the ranch for miles, but found no trace of the she-wolf.

After twelve days of futile search, the last spring cold snap covered the range with snow a foot deep. Jim again circled the ranch without result. He rode out along the border of the hills. Over toward the north end of his range he at last came upon huge wolf tracks that showed the unmistakable print of the two-toed left forepaw.

This was at mid-forenoon. By the end of five hours he had traced the windings of the trail several miles. It finally led up into ground so rough and craggy that he had to leave his horse and trail afoot. Fortunately the snow had fallen without wind.

It lay on the tops of the ledges and boulders as well as in the hollows.

Amidst a mass of shattered rocks he came upon a back trail of the she-wolf, very fresh. Impulse would have sent him veering off along the fresh track. But reason checked him.

He studied the double set of prints. The first one, several hours old, went on in among the rocks; the new one came out. He kept on along the older trail.

Close ahead appeared a low opening under a massive ledge. He crawled in. At the far end was a dark hole. He listened. There was no sound. He struck a match.

Huddled together in the bed of the lair crouched five young cubs, all as silent and motionless as if carved from wood. In the presence of the strange intruder none ventured to utter its feeble snarl or growl. They seemed very soft and cuddly—little bundles of gray fur as appealing as kittens. But they were the litter of that two-toed she-devil.

Jim thought of his slaughtered cattle. In quick succession, he tapped the puppish heads with the butt of his rifle. Even more hurriedly he thrust the soft little bodies into his pockets and crawled out to lie in wait behind a crest, down-wind from the den.

HIS hope was to shoot the she-wolf when she came running back to her lair. With so young a litter, she could be counted upon to return before the chill of nightfall. There was good reason to expect that she would come from the direction that she had left and so would fail to scent him or find his trail.

An hour passed. No slightest sign of the she-wolf. He shifted slightly to ease his cramped limbs. From down the gulch came a scream—a frightful cry more blood-curdling than the womanish scream of a mountain lion. His horse!

Jim sprang to his feet and went bounding down over the snow-covered rocks, reckless of the risk of a broken leg or neck. He found the bronco pouring out its life blood from a single slash in the throat.

When his first wild rage gave way to cold fury, Jim looked around. He saw where the she-wolf had come up his trail, had circled down-wind past the horse, had crept up to peer over a ledge at the spot where he had lain in wait. She had then gone back to kill the horse.

Hopeless of success, yet stubbornly determined, he went down again to follow her new trail from the horse. The tracks started off directly away from the den, turned up a chute between the rocks, turned again, and curved down around to the mouth of the den. Beyond any doubt, she had killed his horse to draw him from his ambush and give her the chance to reach her cubs.

No use looking in the cave. The new trail doubled out and headed off south. The wide gaps between the foot marks showed that the cubless mother had bounded away at full speed.

Many miles stretched out between the den and the ranch house, and cowboy boots are not made for walking. Long after nightfall Jim slammed in at the kitchen door, sore-footed and morose.

When he had growled out the account of his failure Molly sought to soothe him.

"Well, it's not as bad as it might be. You got her mate. Now you've got her pups. Like as not she'll conclude it's getting too unhealthy around these parts. She'll vamose for good this time."

"No such luck. She'll only lay low and sneak back to get her revenge. She's a regular devil. She knows our hay is 'most all gone. She knows we'll soon have to turn the herd out again to graze."

"But what are you going to do about it?"

Jim fell to cleaning his rifle. Before dawn he had Molly's saddle on another bronco and was loping across country for the den. At nightfall he came back with his own saddle and his jaw set still harder.

"Trailed her way south, almost to the divide. No use. Hot as blazes. Tracks melted out as I followed them. All the same I've got a plan. I'm going to settle her hash. I'll borrow one of the Bar X dogs and trail her, with a rope on him. I'll trail her down if it takes all year!"

MOLLY saw a chance for a change after her months of loneliness.

"Why not all go, Jim? We can leave the herd corraled. I've been feeling kind of poorly, and you remember Mrs. Brent sent word she wanted me to come and see her. Besides I want to ask her advice about buying those new-fangled coveralls for May."

"It'll make me slower getting my start—Aw, no need to go and cry. We'll all pile into the wagon, Molly."

Nearly half a day was lost forking enough hay into the feed racks to supply the corralled herd over a three-day period. The old round-up road wound and twisted through the rough country along the base of the hills. The afternoon was well advanced before the wagon reached the outthrust ridges of the divide.

Jim wished to make the Bar X ranch before nightfall. Instead of following the long eastward crook of the road around the divide ridges, he headed up a pass that he knew could be crossed with a lightly loaded wagon.

The ground was strewn with bushes and boulders. In places the slope rose steeply. Little May, tired from her morning's play and the hours of jolting along the round-up road, had fallen asleep in the hay filled bed of the wagon.

Molly sat up on the wobbly seat with Jim, all her attention fixed upon the ground ahead. She felt certain they never would be able to drive through the pass.

The sharp tilts of the wagon on the steeper slope shifted both child and hay back toward the tailboard. But the wagon bed was deep. Molly, more than ever absorbed in eyeing the rough gulch before and above them, did not think to look back.

An unusually heavy jolt partly wakened the little sleeper. Still in a daze, she lifted herself up with her dimpled hands clutched on the edge of the tailboard. The wagon tilted high at the front end and lurched sideways.

Little May was flung out so suddenly that she had no time to utter a cry. In falling, her head grazed a big boulder. She dropped stunned into the bush beside the boulder.

The wagon bumped on up over the break of the pass. The down-pitch on the far side looked even more dangerous than the ascent. The clatter of horses' hoofs on the ledges, the clash of the bumping wheels, the shriek and grind of the brakes, drowned all other sounds.

When consciousness came back to little May, she was all alone in the gulch. At first she felt more lonely than frightened. She cried out lustily, but without fear.

Back from the shadowing pass came only a low rumble. She cried out again, with a slight quaver in her little voice. There was no answering call. Even the rumble died away. Rocks and bushes, trees and hill slopes, all became appallingly silent. Fear clutched at the little girl's baby heart. She was alone. Mamma and papa had gone off and left her!

Her cries for them shrilled into screams. She started to look for them, crawling away from the wagon tracks, and even taking a few uncertain steps. This proved too hard, however, and she soon dropped to her knees once more. A sharp pitch quickened her movements. Her growing fear deepened into terror. Dread of the Unknown added to the terror over being lost that drives even grown people into temporary madness. Panic-stricken, the child scrambled shrieking through the pines and aspens of the hillside.

Her strength and activity had continued to increase through the winter and spring. Fright now redoubled her quickness and endurance. Sticks and stones caught her, but at every fall she scrambled on, scratched and bruised, more terrified than ever.

The sun went down. Twilight deepened the awesome shadows of the trees. A new terror—dread of the blackness—added to her panic.

At last, in the black shadows, she plunged into a clump of young spruce. The close-set branches wedged about her, held fast against all her frantic struggles to escape. Exhausted, she sank down in the midst of the mercifully soft sprays and cruelly jabbing dead twigs.

Had not the denseness of the clump made a nest for her, and had not the warmth of the thaw continued, she must have perished from exposure. The chill of dawn roused her from the heavy sleep of exhaustion. She lay whimpering, too stiff and sore to move.

The rising sun sent its hot rays streaming aslant through a gap in the little spruce tops. They warmed the blue-faced shivering child—gave her back a little strength. The panic terror had numbed her. Like a fearful young animal, she wormed out of the spruce clump and crept away, instinctively searching for the food and drink that her over-strained little body so greatly needed.

But the feeble spurt of strength that the sun heat had given her soon ebbed away. She began to falter. Her mouth was parched with thirst. Before her she heard the sound of running water. She crawled toward it.

The ground dipped to a mud hole, crusted on the surface but soft below. At the edge of the bank the creeping child's limbs gave way. She rolled down. Both legs and one arm plunged into the mud. She would have smothered at once, had not her other arm and her head fallen across the half-buried trunk of a rotted sapling. Her flurried efforts to escape twisted her head and upper body back upon the bank. There her struggles ceased. She lay motionless, utterly spent, almost dead from exhaustion.

Back near the spruce clump Two-Toes came roving through the forest. She trotted along slowly and turned uncertainly from side to side. A wasp buzzed past her nose. She snapped at it viciously. She was very irritable and in great distress. Nearly two full days had gone by since she had last nursed her cubs. She was at the height of her grief over them. Yet since their loss she had made two kills and twice gorged heavily.

From off to the left of her came a whiff of scent, fresh and strong. She whirled and crouched to sniff. It was a familiar scent—the scent of the man-cub. She cut across the trail and glided along it like a gray-white ghost.

A few moments brought her to the edge of the slough gully. She peered down. The man-cub lay half in the mud. Its eyes were closed. It moaned and whimpered like a starving wolf cub.

The man was not near. Two-Toes crept down cautiously upon her quarry.

The trapped child was utterly helpless—utterly at the mercy of the bloodthirsty, malignantly vengeful beast.

CHAPTER XI

HALF down the south slope of the pass Jim halted his team at the edge of a spring pool. While the horses drank, Molly turned to look back at the steep pitch down which the wagon had slithered and bumped.

At her cry Jim slued around and stared into the deep wagon bed, astounded. He could not disbelieve his own eyes. May was gone.

They unhitched the horses and rode them bareback up the pass and down the other side. Molly peered anxiously at every stone along the way the wagon had come. She feared to find little May lying crushed by her fall. If the child had not been killed, why had she not cried out? Why did they not now see her crawling up the road?

Jim soon caught his wife's fear. All the way down the rough slope they stared ahead, at every moment expecting and dreading to come in sight of a motionless blue-clad little figure with tousled yellow-gold curls. Yet yard by yard the gulch mounted behind them without disclosing a trace of the missing child.

They at last reached the foot of the steeper pitch. There Molly distinctly remembered having looked over her shoulder and seen the child fast asleep in the hay. Jim heard this with immense relief.

"If that's so, she's been jounced out up above here—and it didn't hurt her much, else she'd have been 'longside the tracks. She must have crawled off aside—or perhaps she took the back trail. I'll look."

He loped down to the round-up road. Where they had turned off the road a stretch of damp soft ground was deeply marked with tire tracks and the hoofprints of the horses. But he could find no trace of May's sturdy little limbs.

He loped back to Molly.

"It's all right. We'll soon find her now. It's a cinch she's up in the pass."

THEY spread out on each side of the wagon tracks and rode up the gulch, searching around all the bushes and rocks. Every few moments one or another called loudly. No answering cry came back to them from the silent wooded slopes. And nowhere could they see a trace of the lost child.

Panic seized Molly that the very sturdiness and independence she had encouraged in the child would take her farther than would be thought possible.

As if in keeping with their fast-sinking hopes, the sun went down behind the jagged Caratopis. By the time they had worked over the summit of the pass and down to the wagon, the spring twilight had faded into dusk.

Molly, now half frantic with dread, would have turned to hurry back again. Jim harshly ordered her to light a fire and cook supper, while he built other fires and continued the search.

The good sense of this steadied Molly. May was so young that she could not have gone far. She would see one or other of

the fires and make for it through the night. She would be very hungry.

The supper was soon cooked. Molly put more logs on the fire and started to climb, carrying her shotgun in one hand and in the other the food packed in a bucket.

A fire bigger than her own blazed at the top of the pass. She groped her way up to it through the darkness, over ledges and around boulders. Down in the other side of the pass still another fire flared its red beacon. Off in the trees she heard the reports of Jim's automatic. The heavier roar of her shotgun boomed and echoed between the hillsides.

After a time Jim rode up to her. He still attempted to look cheerful.

"It's all right, Molly. Keep a stiff upper lip. She's bound to sight one or t'other of the fires."

He saw the bucket of food and slipped down off his tired horse. Molly could no more than swallow a cupful of coffee. But Jim ate heartily. Afterward he gave her his pistol and returned to his search through the forest on each slope of the pass. Molly's work was to fire shots at regular intervals and keep the fires burning.

All night they kept at it, without sleep or rest. Dawn found them haggard and weary. But Jim refused to admit his great fear that they would not find Baby May until too late.

"It's been a warm night. She couldn't have hurt herself much. I'm going for the Bar X dogs."

He shifted to the least out-ridden of the horses and jogged south down the pass to cut into the Bar X continuation of the round-up road. Molly started back for still another search. She went almost on hands and knees, seeking along the wheel tracks for the place where little May had fallen from the wagon.

Hours later Jim came spurring over the pass on a borrowed horse. With him were a pack of dogs, five Bar X top riders, and Parley Brent himself. They found Molly down the north gulch, creeping away from the wagon tracks along a line of almost invisible marks.

She had found the bush into which May had fallen from the wagon. On its foliage were a few drops of blood that had oozed from the child's head where it bruised on the rock.

The trained dogs had only to be put to the scent of the trail. No need for them to search out the faint scuffle marks left by the crawling baby. To their keen noses the scent trail was as plain as a streak of white paint would have been to the eyes of the men. But before Brent gave them the word to start, each man put his rope on a dog. Molly would not be left alone with her dread. She mounted behind Jim.

At first the trail led almost straight westward, aslant the slope. As the trees thickened it began to twist about from side to side, but it never once doubled back toward the starting point. It wound around the shoulder of the hill into the next gulch, across the gulch, and over the low ridge beyond.

On being told May's age, Brent expressed amazement that so young a child could have gone so far. He was still wondering when the dogs led them to the clump of young spruces. The signs were easy enough for experienced eyes to read.

"Bedded down here for the night," said Brent. "Strong enough this morning to wriggle clear. Not so bad, Mrs. Foster."

Hope shone again in the despair-darkened eyes of Molly. The searchers hastened on along the trail. Very soon the pack leader uttered an excited yelp. To Brent the cry could have only one meaning. He turned to the eager mother, his hard red face like a wooden mask.

"You're tired out, Mrs. Foster. You best turn back and get a little rest. Jim, you take her back."

Jim stared, puzzled. Molly was first to catch the meaning of the big cattleman's solicitude.

"Oh!" she cried. "You think—?" She pointed to the dogs. All now were leaping and yelping and straining at their ropes. "Oh! hurry—hurry!"

Brent started on as fast as his nimble cowpony could turn and twist around trees and bushes at the heels of the pack leader. At times the trail ran under branches so thick and low that he had to haul the dog back and drag him around the obstruction.

They heard the ripple and purl of a creek. Before long the dogs brought them to the bank of a small gully. The tracks down at the edge of the mud hole were as unmistakable as the little nest in the clump of young spruces.

Molly gave no heed to the urgings of Brent. She would not stop at the top of the bank with the men and dogs. She

slipped to the ground and ran down the bank ahead of Jim. Brent waddled after them, his face more than ever wooden from the effort to cover his feelings.

The faintest of faint hopes struggled up through the blackness of Molly's despair.

"But—there's no—red—nothing—not even her shoes!"

Jim's voice came thick and hoarse between his stiff lips.

"No use. Look at the drag-mark and that print. The two-toed she-devil! I got her mate and cubs. Now she—"

"It's sure, Mrs. Foster," confirmed Brent. "Only thing—look how the little one was bogged in the slough. All the chances are she was dead—before. That's something to think of."

Molly crumpled as if shot through the heart. Parley Brent himself ran around the head of the mud hole and over the low gravel bar of the creek bed to fetch a hatful of water. As Jim sprinkled Molly's face, Brent straightened his lean six feet two of bone and sinew.

"The drag-trail ends in the water. It's hell, Jim—hell! She mustn't see what we'll find where that damned two-toed devil left the creek. You can take her home. We'll run the she-devil."

"No, sir." Jim's voice was low and quiet. His eyes had an odd half vacant look. "No, you might run her off again out of reach. I'll thank you to take Molly to Mrs. Brent, and loan me your best dog, the silent one. I don't want the horse."

"You never can run Two-Toes down afoot, boy!"

"Wait and see. If only you'll take Molly, and send a man to turn my herd adrift. It doesn't much matter what happens to them now."

The young mother's eyes had opened. She turned her white face toward her husband.

"You're right, Jim. Go get that murderous she-devil!"

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Jim left the others, back in the pass, he carried his rifle in his hand, and on his shoulder a single blanket rolled in his slicker. The short rope leash of the dog that he had chosen was tied to his belt. He had exchanged his high-heeled boots for a pair of home-made cowhide moccasins.

He walked over the hills and down to the mud hole at a steady, but rather slow pace. Even when he set the dog on the trail of the gray killer he did not quicken his step. No man or horse or dog could hope to outrace the she-wolf or tire her out.

His plan was different. He aimed to trail her like a slow-hound—trail her day after day. The trail would grow stale. The dog would lose it. But they would keep casting about. Sooner or later they would pick up her fresh trail. And sooner or later—perhaps within a few weeks, perhaps not until months had passed, yet sooner or later, he would come upon the she-wolf close enough for a shot.

The idea was not to hurry, never to tire himself out, but to keep trailing all day, every day, from dawn to dusk. If the unguarded Circle H herd tempted the murderous beast to hang around for the gratifying of her blood lust, so much the better. What mattered all the cattle in the world if only he could, in the end, get his rifle sights on the she-devil!

At the very start came a hitch. The silently trailing dog tugged him to the creek bank. They waded across. On the far bank the dog ran around in circles, snuffing vainly for the hated wolf scent.

With subtle cunning, the gray killer had lost her trail in the first running water to which she had come. But against her craft were matched the wit and stubborn persistence of the man as well as the nose of the dog.

JIM led his perplexed trailer down the west bank of the creek to where it crossed the round-up road. There they turned and came up the east bank. At the starting point they crossed over again and went up the west bank.

Near where the stream came tumbling down in cascade falls through and over a great mass of broken crags the dog again struck the trail. There was no sign of a dragged body.

Jim had heard that lobos never carry meat any distance. Yet he had seen what Two-Toes' mate had done. And, like him, the she-wolf differed from other wolves. Like him she was a giant in size and wonderfully cunning.

He followed the dog on along the trail, hoping and dreading to find what was left of his child. The trail twisted up-slope and ran along just under the crest of a

ridge. At a break in the ridge it dipped into the gulch, crossed a deep creek, and slanted up to another ridge top.

In all this distance there had been no trace of the body. Jim began to think that the crafty beast had dropped her kill either in the first creek or the second. But the uncertainty of this kept him from turning back.

Miles farther on, in the heart of the Caratopis, the trail curved down through a dense growth of timber to the edge of a little beaver meadow. Two leaps out from the cover of trees lay the body of a six-pronged buck. The bloodthirsty she-devil had killed again. No hope now of finding the body of little May.

Sunset was close. The crafty Two-Toes would not return to her last kill. Jim stopped to feed the dog and broil himself a venison steak. Above all else, he must keep strong and enduring.

After the meal he again set the dog on the trail of the killer. It led south, through almost impassable scrub and crags. At nightfall he bedded into a clump of young spruce like the one in which little May had huddled. He had his blanket and slicker and the dog to keep him warm.

In the first glimmer of dawn they turned out, well rested. A dry biscuit each made their breakfast. They started on as soon as Jim could see the foresight of his rifle.

The trail made an eastward bend and ran back over gullies and crags, hills and gulches, almost in a beeline toward that slough mud hole of horrible memory. But near the creek the dog struck a fresher cross trail.

Here, Jim told himself, was a sample of the good luck that he had hoped for. Instead of having to keep on along the older trail, he could cut in on the new one, probably saving many miles of twists and turns.

The she-wolf seemed to keep incessantly on the move. In the scrub and crags and deep gullies of the Caratopis her tireless legs could cover more ground in a few hours than he could labor through and over in three or four days. But she sometimes doubled on herself. Sooner or later he would come along her back trail as she looped around to cross it.

The second nightfall found him and the dog deep in the hills north from the mud-hole creek. This time they did not sup on venison. Noon of the next day had passed before they found what the coyotes had left of Two-Toes' last kill—a young doe.

Again the trail streaked off in a beeline —this time southward. But west of the ranch, near the she-wolf's last year's den, the dog struck a fresh cross trail. It led down the former runway ridge of the wolf mates.

For the first time since the start of the hunt, Jim quickened his stride. The sun set as they trotted across the lower range. The herd was grazing almost within view from the ranch buildings. As Jim expected, the trail soon led him to a dead yearling. His surprise was that the killer had not slaughtered other calves. He called off his dog helper and spent the night at the ranch house.

Daybreak again found them taking up the trail where they had left it. From the carcass of the calf it ran straight southwest. Jim was no slow-wit. The coincidence dawned upon him. From at or near the two other kills the she-devil had likewise cut a beeline across country.

He rolled the matter over in his mind as the dog led him straight on to the southwest. Why had the killer raced so directly away from her kills? Was it merely to get as many miles as possible away from pursuers? Or—

THAT first back trail had gone straight to the mud-hole creek. The second back trail was headed for the same part of the hills, until the dog turned off it on the fresh cross trail. Now this third back trail also was heading toward the divide, near the pass.

On the day when he had found her den and killed her litter, there was just a chance that he might have missed one of the cubs. The match light had been none too clear, and he had hurried the work in order to get out and ambush the she-wolf. A missed cub would account for this beelining back toward the divide.

No doubt about it! She had saved one of the litter and taken it to a new den up that damnable mud-hole creek.

A short distance below the crossing of the round-up road the trail slanted down to the bank of the mud-hole creek and vanished in the water. Jim did not hesitate over choosing between the two banks. He shortened the dog's leash and waded up the middle of the stream.

After rather more than a mile he saw the prints of the she-wolf on the east bank.

They led up out of the water. But careful examination showed that they were too recent to have been made the previous afternoon or evening. They looked no more than two or three hours old. He held the dog out in the stream and waded on against the shallow current.

All the way up to the crossing near the mud hole he scrutinized the banks with utmost care. He saw no more fresh prints of the gray killer. He went on, still more slowly and cautiously.

At last, near the falls, he came to where bare ledges rose from the water in easy steps. He allowed the dog to sniff the lower ledge without stepping on it. Midway the animal's sudden tug and whine told him that he had found a trail.

Jim caught the direction of the wind and veered over to the opposite side of the creek. A few yards farther up he waded the pool of the lowermost fall and boosted the dog up the wet rocks at the side of the white water.

Alongside the brink of the fall was a rock that offered good cover. After they had eaten, he muzzled the dog with his neckerchief and hog-tied its legs with the leash. The quieter the animal lay, the fainter the scent that it would give off.

He himself sat very still, his rifle ready to thrust out over the rock, his gaze fixed upon the creek where it twisted out of sight among the alders. A faint breath of air sucked up the creek bed from a shadow of the trees. The mid-afternoon sun beat hot on the rocks of the cascade crags.

An hour passed. Jim sat so still that the shy life of the wilds began to show itself. A squirrel ventured down from its home pine beside the falls, sat up to stare at the motionless man and dog, and dug into one of its winter caches of cone seeds.

A water ouzel came flitting to dive in the pool above the fall. It popped out and teetered up and down on a stone not six feet away. A woodpecker started his rapping search for grubs. Other birds began to twitter.

When cramped muscles at last compelled Jim to shift his position, he moved very slowly. Not for anything would he frighten the little creatures of the woods. The old she-wolf would be keen to note whether they were alarmed or undisturbed.

His quiet shift did not frighten them. They had accepted his presence as harmless. Their activities of song and food-gathering went on and on without a break.

He had sat still for another full hour when a sudden hush fell upon the small busy-bodies. It was this startling stop-off that jerked his overstrained gaze back into focus. Half way up from the turn he saw a gray-white something gliding along in the shadow of the west bank.

He blinked and peered hard at the ghostly thing. Its vague outlines became distinct. He made out the long, slinking broad-shouldered body, the drooping hindquarters, the bushy low-carried tail, the broad massive head.

It was the she-wolf, the crafty killer, the murderous old she-devil, hoary almost to whiteness from her many years of slaughter, of malignant blood lust. An icy chill seemed to freeze the blood in his veins. His flesh crawled and quivered with horror and loathing and hate.

This slinking, ferocious, bloodthirsty thing was the beast devil that had twice stalked his little girl—his helpless dimpled baby daughter. The first time he had killed her equally bloodthirsty old mate. But the second time she had succeeded.

Rage so unsteadied his hand that the barrel of his rifle rattled against the rock. Faint as the click of metal must have sounded through the roar of the falls, the she-wolf stopped. She pricked her sharp ears forward and looked up. She half crouched, ready to dash away.

In another moment she might have bounded off in swift flight. The thought stiffened Jim's shuddering muscles to iron steadiness. He thrust the rifle barrel over the rock. The range was close. But in the same instant that he pressed the trigger, the she-wolf leaped to the right.

The bullet struck a little too far back. Though it knocked her sideways, it neither pierced her heart nor broke her shoulder. She whirled over on her feet and leaped to the ledges with such amazing swiftness that Jim's second bullet scored a total miss. His third shot only grazed her haunch as she flashed behind a sheltering rock.

CURSING his luck, Jim freed the dog and slithered down with him into the pool. He cooled to grim gloating when he found the trail of bright red that led up into the midst of the crags. The she-devil had been hard hit. The trail would not be a long one.

It twisted through a narrow cleft and in under a pair of enormous boulders. The opening was too small for his broad shoulders. But at the far end of the hole he saw daylight.

He blocked the hole with stones, left the dog as guard, and climbed one of the boulders. Over the top he peered down into a rock-walled pit. At the far side a shadowed cave ran back in under the ledges. From the west the late sunrays poured through a gap.

Jim's gaze fixed at once upon the sunny bit of wind-drifted loam at the mouth of the cave. The she-wolf's strength had failed her at the entrance of her den. She lay outstretched, head flat—still as death.

But Jim was taking no chances. He shoved his rifle down over the top of the boulder. Something was astir back in the cave—something larger than a young wolf cub. He paused. Could the old she-devil already have taken another mate?

He raised the rifle muzzle to cover the cave mouth. Whatever the thing might be, it was coming out. It crawled slowly. Now the head pushed forward out of the black shadow. The sunrays gleamed softly on a tangle of golden-yellowed curls. After the matted little head appeared the blue of the tattered dress.

Dumfounded, Jim crouched with outthrust rifle, frozen—petrified.

The creeper came on out of the cave shadow. Now it was almost touching the huge motionless body of the she-wolf. The little hands reached out—they touched the gray-white head.

Jim was not conscious of his gasp, but Two-Toes heard. Her greenish-yellow eyes opened. They glared up and saw the man. She was dying. She could not get up on all fours. Yet she managed to lift her forebody—to put her thick shoulders between her man-cub and the enemy.

Her ears flattened back. Her nose wrinkled. Her lips writhed clear of the worn white fangs that had so often torn and mangled living flesh. She snarled horribly, snarled with all the savage ferocity of her malignant nature.

The child flung her arms about the bristling gray-white neck—clasped her tiny hands under those frightful jaws—clung close to the bloodthirsty killer as a frightened baby clings to its mother.

Jim glared back at the hideously snarling beast. Even had he not been so utterly paralyzed with amazement, he would not have dared to move, much less to shoot. Little May was crouched against the she-devil's head and shoulders. A bullet would have pierced through into her body.

Yet to see her there, so near those jaws! A single slash of the fangs would rip her tender throat.

An age seemed to drag past. In reality it was only a few moments. The twisting uplift of her forebody had opened wide the wound in the side of the she-wolf. Her lifeblood gushed out.

Her snarls became still more malignant, yet they lost resonance and volume. The legs that had upborne her massive forebody over vast distances so tirelessly, gave way at last. She sank down. Her eyes began to glaze. Her head flattened to the ground. Yet still a hoarse growl rumbled in her throat—still the hate-drawn lips bared the cruel fangs.

The child had sunk down with the beast. She bent over to stroke the prostrate head. She coaxed with cooing little noises.

The dying wolf stirred. She was too far gone to raise her head. But she managed to turn it. Her long red tongue thrust out. It licked the downbent face of the child.

When Jim leaped down into the pit little May scurried into the cave on hands and knees. She screamed with fright when he crawled after her and caught her up in his arms. She writhed and struggled and shrieked like a captured little animal.

He carried her out into the sunshine. After much soothing and hushing and gentle stroking of her fear-wrinkled forehead, her frantic terror at last began to subside.

He kept on caressing and appealing to her. She became still. The dilated pupils of her eyes contracted to normal size. Their frightened stare softened into the radiance of returning reason and recognition.

"Papa!" she murmured.

As he kissed her he noticed that none of the many scratches and bruises on her face and arms and hands and legs were fresh. All had healed or were healing. And not one of them had been made by a tooth. The she-wolf had carried or dragged the child with those deadly jaws, yet had not even broken the tender baby skin. The child's legs and arms were free from the mud of the slough. They probably had trailed in the water when the she-wolf waded with her up the creek.

Most surprising of all, the sturdy little body was still plump. It had lost only a few pounds in weight. Yet days had passed since Molly had last fed her!

Jim lifted his eyes to stare over her tangled matted golden curls at the dead she-wolf. A great light dawned upon his perplexed mind. So that was it—that accounted for the miracle. He had taken away from Two-Toes her suckling cubs. Two days later she had come upon the little child, helpless and hungry. Her need for relief had been as great as the child's need for food.

NOT mercy but mother-need had compelled the she-devil to forego her blood lust. Her nature had not changed. She had been no less cruel and malignant to the last gasp. And her left forepaw was worth three hundred dollars. She had cost him far more than that in slaughtered cattle.

Little May had become very still in his arms. He looked down at her. She was fast asleep. He laid her gently upon the soft warm loam and picked up a stone.

When he climbed up out of the pit with the peacefully sleeping child, the huge gray-white body of the she-wolf lay under a cairn of stones heavy enough to keep out crows and coyotes.

In Jim's mind's eye was the memory of the child's hands on the savage head—and the caressing lick of the dying wolf-mother's tongue.

The two-toed left forepaw was not in his pocket.

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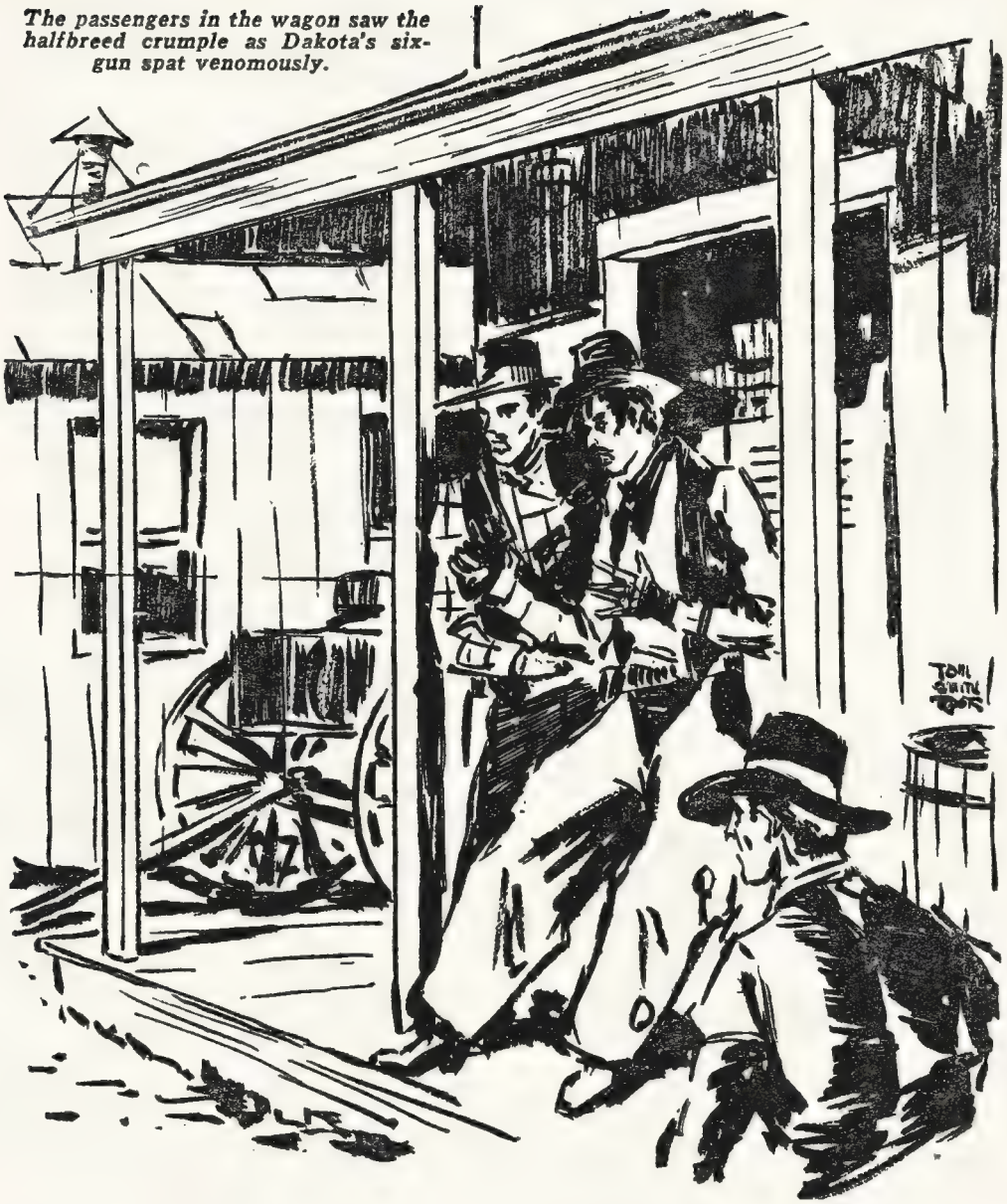
CHAPTER I

A Woman on the Trail

MANY disquieting thoughts oppressed Miss Sheila Langford as she halted her pony on the crest of a slight rise and swept the desolate and slumberous world with an anxious glance. Quite the most appalling of these thoughts developed from a realization of the fact that she had lost the trail. The whole categorical array of inconveniences incidental to traveling in a new, unsettled country paled into insignificance when she considered this horrifying and entirely unromantic fact. She was lost, she was alone and night was coming.

She would not have cared so much about the darkness, for she had never been a cow-



The passengers in the wagon saw the halfbreed crumple as Dakota's six-gun spat venomously.

ard, and had conditions been normal she would have asked nothing better than a rapid gallop over the dim plains. But as she drew her pony up on the crest of the rise a rumble of thunder reached her ears. Of course it would rain, now that she had lost the trail. It usually did rain when one was abroad without prospect of shelter; it always rained when one was lost.

Well, there was no help for it, of course, and she had only herself to blame for the blunder. For the other — not unusual— irritating details that had combined to place her in this awkward position she could blame, first Duncan, the manager of the Double R—who should have sent someone to meet her at the station; the station agent—who had allowed her to set forth

in search of the Double R without a guide —though even now, considering this phase of the situation, she remembered that the agent had told her there was no one to send—and certainly the desolate appearance of Lazette had borne out this statement; and last, she could blame the country itself for being an unfeatured wilderness.

Something might be said in extenuation of the station agent's and the Double R manager's sins of omission, but without doubt the country was what she had termed it—an unfeatured wilderness. Her first sensation upon getting a view of the country had been one of deep disappointment. Her father had assured her of its beauty, and she had come prepared to fall in love with it, but within the last half hour—when she had begun to realize that she had lost the trail—she had grown to hate it.

She sat erect, flushed and indignant, to look around at the country. Ominous black clouds were scurrying, wind-whipped, spreading fan-like through the sky, darkening the plains, creating weird shadows. Objects that Sheila had been able to see quite distinctly when she had reined in her pony were no longer visible. She stirred uneasily.

"We'll go somewhere," she said aloud to the pony, as she urged the animal down the slope. "If it rains we'll get just as wet here as we would anywhere else."

The pony shambled forward, carefully picking its way, and Sheila mentally thanked the station agent for providing her with so reliable a beast.

Shuffling down the slope the pony struck a level. After traveling over this for a quarter of an hour Sheila became aware of an odd silence; looking upward she saw that the clouds were no longer in motion; that they were hovering, low and black, directly overhead. A flash of lightning suddenly illuminated the sky, showing Sheila a great waste of world that stretched to four horizons.

Suddenly a breeze swept over her, and a few large drops of rain dashed into her face.

The pony broke into a sharp lope and she allowed it to hold the pace, wisely concluding that the animal was probably more familiar with the country than she. She found herself wondering why she had not thought of that before—when, for example, a few miles back she had deliberately guided it out of a beaten trail toward a section of country where, she had imagined, the traveling would be better. No doubt she had strayed from the trail just there.

The drops of rain grew more frequent; they splashed into her face; she could feel them striking her arms and shoulders. The pony's neck and mane became moist under her hand, the darkness increased for a time and the continuing rumble in the heavens presaged a steady downpour.

THE pony moved faster now; it needed no urging, and Sheila held her breath for fear that it might fall, straining her eyes to watch its limbs as they moved with the sure regularity of an automaton. After a time they reached the end of the level; Sheila could tell that the pony was negotiating another rise, for it slackened speed appreciably and she felt herself settling back against the cantle of the saddle. A little later she realized that they were going down the opposite side of the rise, and a moment later they were again on a level. A deeper blackness than they had yet encountered rose on their right, and Sheila correctly decided it to be caused by a stretch of wood. Suddenly her pony nickered shrilly!

A thrill of fear assailed Sheila. She knew horses and was certain that some living thing was on the trail in front of her. Halting the pony, she held tightly to the reins through a short, tense silence. Then presently, from a point just ahead on the trail, came an answering nicker. Sheila's pony cavorted nervously and broke into a lope, sharper this time in spite of the tight rein she kept on it. Her fear grew, though mingling with it was a devout hope. If only the animal which had answered her own pony belonged to the Double R!

The pony's gait had quickened into a gallop—which she could not check. In the past few minutes the darkness had lifted a little; she saw that the pony was making a gradual turn, following a bend in the river. Then came a flash of lightning and she saw, a short distance ahead, a pony and rider, stationary, watching. With an effort she succeeded in reining in her own animal, and while she sat in the saddle, trembling and anxious, there came another flash of lightning and she saw the rider's face.

The rider was a cowboy. She had distinctly seen the leathern chaps; sombrero,

the scarf at his throat. Doubt and fear assailed her. What if the man did not belong to the Double R? What if he were a road agent—an outlaw? Immediately she heard an exclamation from him in which she detected much surprise and not a little amusement.

"Shucks!" he said. "It's a woman!"

There came a slow movement. In the lifting darkness Sheila saw the man return a pistol to the holster that swung at his right hip. He was not over five feet distant from her; she could feel her pony nuzzling his, and she could dimly see the rider's face. It belonged to a man of probably twenty-eight or thirty; it had regular features, keen, level eyes and a firm mouth. There was a slight smile on his face and somehow the fear that had oppressed Sheila began to take flight. And while she sat awaiting the turn of events his voice again startled her:

"I reckon you've stampeded off your range, ma'am?"

A sigh of relief escaped Sheila. The voice was very gentle and friendly.

"I don't think that I have stampeded—whatever that means," she returned, reassured now that the stranger gave promise of being none of the dire figures of her imagination, "I am lost merely. You see, I am looking for the Double R ranch."

"Oh," he said; "the Double R."

There ensued a short silence.

"Do you know where the Double R ranch is?" There was a slight impatience in her voice.

"Sure," came his voice. "It's up the crick a ways."

"How far?"

"Twenty miles."

"Oh!" This information was disheartening. Twenty miles! And the rain was coming steadily down; she could feel it soaking through her clothing. His nonchalance, his serenity—something about him—irritated her. Didn't he know she was getting wet? But while her indignation over his inaction grew she saw that he was doing something—fumbling at a bundle that seemed to be strapped to the cantle of his saddle. And then he leaned forward—very close to her—and she saw that he was offering her a tarpaulin.

"Wrap yourself in this," he directed. "It ain't pretty, of course, but it'll keep you from getting drenched. Rain ain't no respecter of persons."

She placed the tarpaulin around her shoulders. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he was without protection. She hesitated.

"Thank you," she said, "but I can't take this. You haven't anything for yourself."

A careless laugh reached her. "That's all right; I don't need anything."

THERE was silence again. He broke it with a question.

"What are you figuring to do now?"

"I do not know," she answered, no way of escape from her predicament presenting itself.

"You can go on, of course," he said, "and get lost, or hurt—or killed. It's a bad trail. Or"—he continued, hesitating a little and appearing to speak with an effort—"there's my shack. You can have that."

Of course she would have to accept the shelter of his "shack." There was no help for it, for it was impossible for her to entertain the idea of riding twenty miles over an unknown trail, through the rain and darkness.

She decided quickly.

"I shall accept—I think. Will you please hurry? I am getting wet in spite of this—this covering."

Wheeling without a word he proceeded down the trail, following the river.

After riding for a quarter of an hour they reached a little clearing near the river and Sheila saw her guide halt his pony and dismount. A squat, black shape loomed out of the darkness near her and, riding closer, she saw a small cabin, of the lean-to type, constructed of adobe bricks. A dog barked in front of her and she heard the stranger speak to it. He silently approached and helped her down from the saddle. Then he led both horses away into the darkness on the other side of the cabin. During his absence she found time to glance about her. It was a desolate place.

The stranger reappeared around the corner of the cabin and approached the door. He fumbled at it for a moment and threw it open. He disappeared within and an instant later Sheila heard the scratch of a match and saw a feeble glimmer of light shoot out through the doorway. Then the stranger's voice:

"Come in."

He had lighted a candle that stood on a table in the center of the room, and in its glaring flicker as she stepped inside Sheila

caught her first good view of the stranger's face. She felt reassured instantly, for it was a good face, with lines denoting strength of character. The drooping mustache did not quite conceal his lips, which were straight and firm.

"Afraid?" he questioned.

Sheila stiffened, her eyes flashing defiance. She studied him steadily, her spirit battling his over the few feet that separated them. Then she spoke deliberately, evenly: "I am not afraid of you!"

"That's right." A gratified smile broke on the straight, hard lips. "You've got nerve, ma'am. I'm some pleased that you've got that much trust in me. You don't need to be scared. You're as safe here as you'd be out there." He nodded toward the open door. "Safer," he added with a grave smile; "you might get hurt out there."

He turned abruptly and went to the door, where he stood for a long time looking out into the darkness. She watched him for a moment and then removed the tarpaulin and hung it from a nail in the wall of the cabin. Standing near the table she glanced about her. Beside an open fireplace in a corner were several pots and pans—his cooking utensils. A guitar swung from a gaudy string suspended from the wall. A tin of tobacco and a pipe reposed on another shelf beside a box of matches. A bunk filled a corner and she went over to it, fearing. But it was clean and the bed clothing fresh and she smiled a little as she continued her examination. Turning abruptly, she caught him watching her, an appraising smile on his face.

"You ought to be hungry by now," he said. "There's a fireplace and some wood. Do you want a fire?"

In response to her nod he kindled a fire.

"There's grub in the chuck box," he stated shortly. "There's some pans and things. It ain't what you might call elegant, but it's a heap better than nothing, and I reckon you'll be able to get along." He turned and walked to the doorway, standing in it for an instant, facing out. "Good night," he added. The tarpaulin dangled from his arm.

Evidently he intended going away. A sudden dread of being alone filled her. "Wait!" she cried involuntarily. "Where are you going?"

He halted and looked back at her, an odd smile on his face.

"To my bunk."

"You are going to sleep in the open," she said.

He caught the accusation in her eyes and his face reddened.

"Well," he admitted, "I've done it before."

"Perhaps," she said, a little doubtfully. "But I do not care to feel that I am driving you out into the storm."

"I reckon you ain't afraid to stay here alone, ma'am," he said.

"Yes," she returned frankly, "I am afraid."

A PISTOL flashed in his hand, its butt toward her, and now for the first time she saw another at his hip. She repressed a desire to shudder and stared with dilated eyes at the extended weapon.

"Take this gun," he offered. "It ain't much for looks, but it'll go right handy."

She refused to take the weapon. "I wouldn't know how to use it if I had occasion to. I prefer to have you remain in the cabin—for protection."

He bowed. "I thought you'd—" he began, and then smiled wryly. "It certainly would be some wet outside," he admitted. "It wouldn't be pleasant sleeping. I'll lay over here when I get my blankets."

He went outside and in a few minutes reappeared with his blankets and saddle. Without speaking a word to Sheila he laid the saddle down, spread the blanket over it, and stretched himself out on his back.

"I don't know about the light," he said after an interval of silence. "You can blow it out if you like."

"I prefer to have it burning."

"Suit yourself."

Sheila got up and placed the candle in a tin dish as a precaution against fire. Then, when its position satisfied her she left the table and went to the bunk, stretching herself out on it, fully dressed.

For a long time she lay, listening to the soft patter of the rain on the roof. Her eyes closed presently, sleep was fast claiming her. Then she heard her host's voice:

"You're from the East, I reckon."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"New York."

"City?"

"Albany."

There was a silence. Sheila was thoroughly awake again.

"What have you come out here for?"

Sheila smiled at the rain-spattered window, a flash of pleased vanity in her eyes. His voice had been low, but in it she detected much curiosity, even interest. It was not surprising, of course, that he should feel an interest in her; other men had been interested in her too.

His question remained unanswered. He stirred impatiently.

"You here for a visit?" he questioned.

"Perhaps," she said. "I do not know how long I shall stay. My father has bought the Double R."

"Then Duncan has sold out?" There was satisfaction in his voice.

"You are keen," she mocked.

"And tickled," he added.

His short laugh brought a sudden interest into her eyes. "Then you don't like Duncan," she said.

"I reckon you're some keen too," came the mocking response.

Sheila flushed, turned and looked defiantly at him.

"You got any objections to telling me your name? We ain't been introduced, you know?" he said.

"It is Sheila Langford."

She had turned her head and was giving her attention to the window above her. The fingers of his hand slowly clenched, he raised himself slightly, his body rigid, his chin thrusting, his face pale, his eyes burning with a sudden fierce fire. After a silence that lasted long his voice came again, drawling, well-controlled, revealing nothing of the emotion which had previously affected him.

"What is your father's name?"

"David Dowd Langford. An uncommon middle name, isn't it?"

"Yes. Uncommon," came his reply. His face, with the light of the candle gleaming full upon it, bore a queer pallor—the white of cold ashes. Yet after another long silence his voice came again—drawling, well-controlled, as before:

"What is he coming out here for?"

"He has retired from business and is coming out here for his health."

"What business was he in?"

"Wholesale hardware."

He was silent again and presently, hearing him stir, Sheila looked covertly at him. He had turned, his back was toward her, and he was stretched out on the blanket as though, fully satisfied with the result of his questioning, he intended going to sleep. He had questioned her to his complete satisfaction but had told nothing of himself.

"Who are you?" she questioned.

"Dakota," he said shortly.

"Dakota?" she repeated, puzzled. "That isn't a name; it's a State—or a Territory."

"I'm Dakota. Ask anybody."

This information was far from being satisfactory. Still, she persisted. "Where are you from?"

"Dakota."

That seemed to end it. It had been a short quest and an unsatisfactory one.

"Dakota isn't your real name," she declared sharply.

"Ain't it?"

"No!" she snapped.

"Well, it's as good as any other. Good-night."

Sheila did not answer. Five minutes later she was asleep.

CHAPTER II

Converging Trails

SHEILA had been dreaming of a world in which there was nothing but rain and mud and clouds when a sharp crash of thunder awakened her. Turning to seek a more comfortable position, she saw Dakota sitting at the table, watching her intently.

"Can't sleep, eh?" he said, when he saw her looking at him. "Storm bother you?"

"I think it was the thunder that awakened me," she returned. "Thunder always does. Evidently it disturbs you too."

"I haven't been asleep," he said in a curt tone. He glanced at his watch. "You've been asleep two hours. I've been watching you—and envying you."

"Envying me? Why? Are you troubled with insomnia?"

He laughed. "Nothing so serious as that. It's just thoughts."

"Pleasant ones, of course."

"You might call them pleasant. I've been thinking of you."

Sheila found no reply to make to this.

"How old are you?" he said shortly.

"Twenty-two."

"And you lived East all your life. Lived well, too, I suppose—plenty of money, luxuries, happiness?"

He caught her nod and continued. "Your father too, I reckon—has he been happy?"

"I think so."

"That's odd." He had spoken more to himself than to Sheila and he looked at her with narrowed eyes when she answered.

"What is odd? That my father should be happy—that I should?"

"Odd that anyone who is happy in one place should want to leave that place and go to another. You say your father has been happy; that he's got plenty of money and all that. Then why should he want to live here?"

"He is coming here for his health."

His eyes lighted savagely. But Sheila did not catch their expression for at that moment she was looking at his shadow on the floor. How long, how grotesque, it seemed, and forbidding.

"So he's got everything he wants but his health. What made him lose that?"

"How should I know?"

"Just lost it, I reckon," said Dakota subtly. "Cares and worry?"

"I presume. His health has been failing for about ten years."

Sheila was looking straight at Dakota now and she saw his face whiten, his lips harden. And when he spoke again there was a chill in his voice and a distinct pause between his words.

"Ten years," he said. "That's a long time, isn't it? A long time for a man who has been losing his health. And yet—" There was a mirthless smile on Dakota's face—"ten years is a longer time for a man in good health who hasn't been happy. Couldn't your father have doctored—gone abroad—to recover his health? Or was his a mental sickness?"

"Mental, I think. He worried quite a little."

Dakota turned from her, but not quickly enough to conceal the light of savage joy that flashed suddenly into his eyes.

"Why," exclaimed Sheila, voicing her surprise, "that seems to please you!"

"It does." He laughed oddly. "It pleases me to find that I'm to have a neighbor who is afflicted with the sort of sickness that has been bothering me for—for a good many years."

There was a silence, during which Sheila yawned and Dakota stood motionless, looking straight ahead.

"You like your father, I reckon?" came his voice presently.

"Of course." She looked up at him in surprise. "Why shouldn't I like him?"

"Of course you like him. It's only natural. When is he coming out here?"

"In a month—a month from today." She regarded him with a sudden, new interest. "You are betraying a great deal of curiosity," she accused. "Why?"

"Why," he answered slowly, "I reckon that isn't odd, is it? He's going to be my neighbor, isn't he?"

"Oh!" she said with emphasis of mockery which equaled his. "And you are gossiping about your neighbor even before he comes."

"Your father," he said, "seems to think a heap of you—sending you all the way out here alone."

"I came against his wish; he wanted me to wait and come with him."

Her defense of her parent seemed to amuse him. "Then he likes you?"

"Is that strange? He hasn't anyone else—no relative. I am the only one."

"You're the only one." He repeated her words slowly. "And he likes you."

"It's a curious thing," he said slowly, after an interval, "that a man who has got a treasure grows careless of it in time. It's natural, too. But I reckon fate has something to do with it. Ten chances to one if nothing happens to you your father will consider himself lucky. But suppose you had happened to fall in with a different man than me—we'll say, for instance, a man who had a grudge against your father—and that man didn't have that uncommon quality called 'mercy.' What then? Ten chances to one your father would say it was fate that had led you to him."

"I think," she said scornfully, "that you are talking silly! You have exhibited a wonderful curiosity over my father and me, and though it has all been mystifying and entertaining, I don't purpose to talk to you all night."

"I didn't waken you."

"You are keeping me awake," she retorted.

"Well, good night then," he laughed, "Miss Sheila."

"Good night, Mr.—Mr. Dakota," she returned.

Sheila did not hear him again. Her thoughts dwelt for a little time on him and his mysterious manner. She concentrated her attention on the rain; she could hear the soft, steady patter of it on the roof; she listened to it trickling from the eaves

and striking the glass in the window above her head. Gradually the soft patter seemed to draw farther away, became faint, and more faint, and finally she heard it no more.

IT was the barking of the dog that brought Sheila out of her sleep this time. She sighed and twisted to a more comfortable position. The effort awakened her and she opened her eyes, her gaze resting immediately on Dakota. He still sat at the table, silent, immovable, as before. But now he was sitting erect, his muscles tensed, his gaze on the door—listening.

There was an interval of silence and then came a knocking on the door—loud, unmistakable. After the knock came a voice:

"Hello inside!"

"Hello yourself!" Dakota's voice came with a truculent snap. "What's up?"

"Lookin' for a dry place," came the voice from without.

Sheila's gaze was riveted on Dakota. He arose and noiselessly moved his chair back from the table.

"You alone?" he questioned, his gaze on the door.

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"Campbellite preacher."

For the first time since she had been awake Dakota turned and looked at Sheila. The expression of his face puzzled her. "A parson!" he sneered in a low voice. "I reckon we'll have some praying now." He deliberately drew out his two guns, examined them minutely, returned one to his holster, retaining the other in his right hand. With a cold grin at Sheila he snuffed out the candle between a finger and a thumb and strode to the door—Sheila could hear him fumbling at the fastening. He spoke to the man outside sharply.

"Come in!"

There was a movement; a square of light appeared in the wall of darkness. Watching, Sheila saw, framed in the open doorway, the dim outlines of a figure—a man.

"Stand right there," came Dakota's voice from somewhere in the impenetrable darkness of the interior, and Sheila wondered at the hospitality that greeted a stranger with total darkness and a revolver. "Light a match."

After a short interval of silence there came the sound of a match scratching on the wall, and a light flared up, showing Sheila the face of a man of sixty, bronzed, bearded, with gentle, quizzical eyes.

The light died down, the man waited. Presently Dakota spoke:

"I reckon you're a parson, all right. Close the door."

The parson obeyed the command. "Light the candle on the table!" came the order from Dakota. "I'm not taking any chances until I get a better look at you."

Another match flared up and the parson advanced to the table and lighted the candle. He smiled while applying the match to the wick. "Don't pay to take chances—on anything," he agreed.

"It's a new trail to me—I don't know the country," he went on. "If I hadn't seen your light I reckon I'd have been goin' yet. I was—" He stopped short, seeing Sheila sitting on the bunk. "Shucks, ma'am," he apologized, "I didn't know you were there. If your husband had told me you was here I'd have gone right on an' not bothered you."

Sheila's gaze went from the parson's face and sought Dakota's, a crimson flood spreading over her face and temples.

"I'm not married," she said instantly to the parson; "this gentleman is not my husband."

"Not?" questioned the parson. "Then how—" He hesitated and looked quickly at Dakota, but the latter was watching Sheila.

"This is my first day in this country," explained Sheila.

"I reckon you've been caught on the trail too," the parson said, "by the storm."

Sheila nodded.

He laughed, shortly. "I'm askin' your pardon, ma'am, for takin' you to be married; you don't look like you belonged here—I ought to have knowed that right off."

Sheila told him that he was forgiven and he had no comment to make on this. He drew a bench up near the fire and sat looking at the licking flames. Dakota supplied him with soda biscuit and cold bacon, and these he munched in contentment, talking meanwhile of his travels. Dakota pulled his chair over near the wall opposite the bunk on which Sheila sat, tilted it back, and dropped into it.

A half hour dragged by. The parson did not appear to be sleepy. Sheila glanced at her watch and saw that it was midnight. She wondered much at the parson's wakefulness and her own weariness. But she

could safely go to sleep now, she told herself, and she stretched noiselessly out on the bunk and listened to the parson.

After a time, though, the droning of his voice seemed gradually to grow distant; Sheila lost interest and sank deeper into her doze. How long she had been unconscious she did not know, but presently she was awake again and listening. Dakota's laugh had awakened her.

"So you're going to Lazette, taking it on to him?"

THE parson nodded, smiling. "When a man wants to get married he'll not care much how it gets done. What he wants to do is to get married."

"That's a queer angle," Dakota observed.

It *was* an odd situation, the parson agreed. Never, in all his experience, had he heard of anything like it.

He had stopped for a few hours at Dry Bottom. While there a rider had passed through, carrying word that a certain man in Lazette, called "Baldy," desired to get married. Luckily for his matrimonial plans, the parson had been in Dry Bottom when the rider arrived, and he readily consented—as he intended to pass through Lazette anyway—to carry Baldy's license to him and perform the ceremony.

"Odd, ain't it?" remarked the parson after he had concluded.

"That's a queer angle," repeated Dakota. "You got the license?" he inquired softly.

"I reckon so." The parson fumbled in a pocket, drawing out a folded paper. "I've got it, right enough."

"You've got no objections to me looking at it?" came Dakota's voice. Sheila saw him rise.

"No objections. I reckon you'll be usin' one yourself one of these days."

"One of these days," echoed Dakota.

The parson spread the paper out on the table. Together he and Dakota bent their heads over it.

"There ain't a name on it," Dakota said, "not a name."

"They're reckonin' to fill in the names when they're married," explained the parson. "That there rider ought to have knowed the names, but he didn't. Only knowed that the man was called 'Baldy.' But it don't make any difference; they wouldn't have had to have a license at all in this Territory. But it makes it look more regular when they've got one. All that's got to be done is for Baldy to go over to Dry Bottom an' have the names recorded. Bein' as I can't go, I'm to certify in the license."

"Sure," said Dakota slowly. "It makes things more regular to have a license—more regular to have you certify."

Looking at Dakota, Sheila thought she saw in his face a certain preoccupation; he was evidently not thinking of what he was saying at all. Some idea had formed in his brain, he meditated some surprising action. That she was concerned in his thoughts Sheila did not doubt, for he presently turned and looked straight at her and in his eyes she saw a new expression—a cold, designing gleam that frightened her.

Five minutes later, when the parson announced his intention to care for his horse before retiring and stood in the doorway preparatory to going out, Sheila restrained an impulse to call to him to remain. She succeeded in quieting her fears, however, by assuring herself that nothing could happen now, with the parson so near. Thus fortified, she smiled at Dakota as the parson stepped down and closed the door.

She drew a startled breath in the next instant, though, for Dakota stepped to the door and barred it. Turning, he stood with his back against it.

He caught Sheila's gaze and held it.

"It's odd, ain't it?"

"What is odd?" She could think of nothing else to say.

"Odd that he should come along just at this time. You and me are here, and he comes. Who sent him?"

"Chance, I suppose," Sheila answered.

"You think it was chance," he said, drawling his words. "Well, maybe that's just as good a name for it as any other. We think this is a big world and that we play a big game. But it's a little world and a little game when Fate takes a hand in it. Fate has a queer way of shuffling us around. That's a fact. And Fate is running this game." His mocking laugh had a note of grimness in it, which brought a chill over Sheila. "Just now, Miss Sheila, Fate is playing with brides and bridegrooms and marriages and parsons. That's what is so odd. Fate has supplied the parson and the license; we'll supply the names. Look at the bridegroom, Sheila," he directed, tapping his breast with a finger; *"this is your wedding day!"*

"What do you mean?" Sheila was on her feet, trembling, her face white with fear and dread.

"That we're to be married," he said. "You and me. The parson will tie the knot."

"This is a joke, I suppose?" she said scornfully, attempting a lightness that she did not feel; "a crude one, to be sure, for you certainly cannot be serious."

"I was never more serious in my life," he said slowly. "We are to be married when the parson comes in."

"How do purpose to accomplish this?" she jeered. "The parson certainly will not perform a marriage ceremony without the consent of—without my consent."

"I think," he said coldly, "that you will consent. I am not in a trifling mood."

OUTSIDE they heard the dog bark, heard the parson speak to it.

"The parson is coming," said Sheila, her joy over the impending interruption showing in her eyes.

"Yes, he is coming." Still with his back to the door, Dakota deliberately drew out one of his heavy pistols and examined it minutely.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded, watching these forbidding preparations with dilated eyes.

"That depends," he returned with a chilling laugh. "Have you ever seen a man die? No?" he continued as she shuddered. "Well, if you don't consent to marry me you will see the parson die. Sacrifice yourself and the parson lives; refuse and I shoot the parson down the instant he steps inside the door."

He smiled with straight lips. "You have your choice. Do you care to be responsible for the death of a fellow being?"

For a tense instant she looked at him, and seeing the hard, inexorable glitter in his eyes she cringed away from him and sank to the edge of the bunk, covering her face with her hands.

During the silence that followed she could hear the parson outside—his voice, and the yelping of the dog—evidently they had formed a friendship. The sounds came nearer; Sheila heard the parson try the door. She became aware that Dakota was standing over her and she looked up, shivering, to see his face, still unyielding.

"I am going to open the door," he said. "Is it you or the parson?"

At that word she was on her feet, standing before him, rigid with anger.

"You wouldn't dare to do it!" she said hoarsely; "you—you—"

"I reckon it's the parson," he said in a low voice, which carried an air of finality. He started for the door, hesitated, and came back to the bunk, standing in front of Sheila, looking down into her eyes.

"I am giving you one last chance," he told her. "I am going to open the door. If you want the parson to die, don't look at me when he steps in. If you want him to live, turn your back to him and walk to the fireplace."

He walked to the door, unlocked it, and stepped back, his gaze on Sheila. Then the door opened slowly and the parson stood on the threshold, smiling.

"It's sure some wet outside," he said.

Dakota was fingering the cylinder of his revolver, his gaze now riveted on the parson.

"Why," said the latter, in surprise, seeing the attitudes of Dakota and his guest, "what in the name of—"

There came a movement, and Sheila stood in front of Dakota, between him and the parson. For an instant she stood, looking at Dakota with a scornful, loathing gaze. Then with a dry sob, which caught in her throat, she moved past him and went to the fireplace, where she stood looking down at the flames.

CHAPTER III

This Picture and That

IT was a scene of wild, virgin beauty upon which Sheila Langford looked as she sat on the edge of a grassy butte overlooking the Ute River, with Duncan, the Double R manager stretched out, full length beside her, a gigantic picture on Nature's canvas, glowing with colors which the gods had spread with a generous touch. It was a picture whose beauty might have impressed the most unresponsive. Yet, though Sheila was looking upon it her thoughts were dwelling elsewhere.

This other picture was not so beautiful. It was framed in the rain and the darkness of a yesterday. There was a small clearing there—a clearing in a dense wood beside a river. In the foreground was a cabin. She entered the cabin and stood beside a table upon which burned a candle. A man stood beside the table also—a reck-

less-eyed man, holding a heavy revolver. Another man stood there, too—a man of God. While Shelia watched the man's lips opened; she could hear the words that came through them — she would never forget them:

"To have and to hold from this day forth . . . till death do you part . . ."

It was not a dream, it was the picture of an actual occurrence. She saw every detail of it. She could hear her own protests, her threats, her pleadings; she lived over again her terror as she had crouched in the bunk until the dawn.

The man had not molested her, had not even spoken to her after the ceremony. When the dawn came she had heard him talking to the parson, but could not catch their words. Later she had mounted her pony and had ridden away through the sunshine of the morning. She had been married—it was her wedding day.

The picture was still vivid; she had seen it during every waking moment of the month that she had been at the Double R ranch; it was before her every night in her dreams. It would not fade.

What would her father say when he heard of it—of her marriage to a cowboy, an unprincipled scoundrel? What could he say? The marriage could be annulled, of course! But could she tell her father? Could she bear his reproaches, after her heedlessness?

What would her friends say when they heard of it—as they must hear if she went to the law for redress? Her friends in the East whose good wishes she desired, what would they think when they heard that she had passed a night in a lone cabin with a strange cowboy—had been married to him!

A month had passed since the afternoon on which she had ridden up to the porch of the Double R ranch house to be greeted by Duncan with the information that he had that morning received a telegram from her father announcing her coming. It had been brought from Lazette by a puncher who had gone there for the mail, and Duncan was at that moment preparing to drive to Lazette to meet her, under the impression that she would arrive that day. There had been a mistake, of course, but what did it matter now? The damage had been wrought and she closed her lips. A month had passed and she had not told—she would never tell.

Conversations she had had with Duncan; he seemed a gentleman, living at the Double R ranch house with his sister, but in no conversation with anyone had Sheila even mentioned Dakota's name, fearing that something in her manner might betray her secret.

She looked furtively at Duncan, stretched out beside her on the grass. What would he say if he knew? He would not be pleased, she was certain, for during the month that she had been at the Double R —riding out almost daily with him—he had forced her to see that he had taken a liking to her—more, she herself had observed the telltale signs of something deeper than mere liking.

She had not encouraged this, of course, for she was not certain that she liked Duncan.

As she sat beside him on the grass she found herself studying him.

He was thirty-two—he had told her so himself in a burst of confidence—though she believed him to be much older. The sprinkling of gray hair at his temples had caused her to place his age at thirty-seven or eight. His mouth, she thought, was a trifle weak, yet not exactly weak either, but full-lipped and sensual.

TAKEN altogether his was not a face to trust fully. Duncan liked to talk about himself, but apparently he had about exhausted that subject now, and presently he looked up at her, his eyes narrowing quizzically.

"You have been here a month now," he said. "How do you like the country?"

"I like it," she returned.

"It improves," he said, "on acquaintance —like the people." He flashed a smile at her, showing his teeth.

"I haven't seen very many people," she returned, determined to ignore the personal allusion.

"But those that you have seen?" he persisted.

"I have seen no one except your sister, a few cowboys, and yourself. I haven't paid much attention to the cowboys, I like your sister, and I am not in the habit of telling people to their faces what I think of them. The country does not appear to be densely populated. Are there no other ranches around here—no other cattlemen?"

"The Double R ranch covers an area of one hundred and sixty square miles," said

Duncan. "The ranch house is right near the center of it. To my knowledge there are only two men with shacks around here, and they're mostly of no account. One of them is Doubler—Ben Doubler—who hangs out near Two Forks, and the other is a fellow who calls himself Dakota, who's got a shack about twenty miles down the Ute, a little off the Lazette trail."

"They are ranchers, I suppose?"

Sheila's face was averted so that Duncan might not see the interest which had suddenly come into her eyes.

"Ranchers?" There was a sneer in Duncan's laugh. "Well, you might call them that. But they're only nesters. They've got a few head of cattle and a brand. It's likely they've put their brands on quite a few of the Double R cattle."

"You mean—" began Sheila in a low voice.

"I mean that I think they're rustlers—cattle thieves!" said Duncan venomously.

"How long have these men lived in the vicinity of the Double R?"

"Doubler has been hanging around here for seven or eight years. He was here when I came. Dakota's been here about five years. He bought his brand—the Star—from another nester—Texas Blanca."

"They've been stealing the Double R cattle, you say?" questioned Sheila.

"That's what I think."

"Why don't you have them arrested?"

Duncan laughed mockingly. "Arrested! That's good. You've been living where there's law. But there's no law out here; no law to cover cattle stealing, except our own. And then we've got to have the goods. The sheriff won't do anything when cattle are stolen, but he acts mighty sudden when a man's hung for stealing cattle, if the man ain't caught with the goods."

"And you haven't been able to catch these men, Dakota and Doubler?"

"They're too foxy."

"If I were manager of this ranch and suspected anyone of stealing any of its cattle, I would catch them!" There was a note of angry impatience in Sheila's voice.

"Mebbe," he said. "But as a general thing nosing out a rustler is a pretty ticklish proposition."

"Why?" There was scorn in Sheila's voice.

"Why?" he repeated. "Well, because it's perfectly natural for a man to want to live as long as he can. I don't like them nesters—Dakota especially—and I'd like mighty well to get something on them. But I ain't taking any chances on Dakota."

"Why?"

"I forgot that you ain't acquainted out here," laughed the manager. "No one is taking any chances with Dakota—not even the sheriff. There's something about the cuss which seems to discourage a man when he's close to him—close enough to do any shooting. I've seen Dakota throw down on a man so quick that it would make you dizzy."

"Throw down?"

"Shoot at a man. There was a gambler over in Lazette thought to euchre Dakota. A gun-man he was, from Texas, and—well, they carried the gambler out."

"Killed him?" There was repressed horror in Sheila's voice.

"No, he wasn't entirely put out of business. Dakota only made him feel cheap. Creased him."

"Creased him?"

"Grazed his head with the bullet. Done it intentionally, they say. Told folks he didn't have any desire to send the gambler over the divide; just wanted to show him that when he was playin' with fire he ought to be careful. There ain't no telling what Dakota'd do if he got riled, though."

Sheila's gaze was on Duncan fairly, her eyes alight with contempt. "So you are all afraid of him?"

"Well, I reckon it would amount to about that," he confessed, reddening a little.

"You are afraid of him, too I suppose?"

"I reckon it ain't just that," he parried, "but I ain't taking any foolish risks."

Sheila rose and walked to her pony. She mounted the animal, and then turned and looked at Duncan scornfully.

"A while ago you asked for my opinion of the people of this country," she said. "I am going to express that opinion now. It is that, in spite of his unsavory reputation, Dakota appears to be the only *man* here!"

She took up the reins and urged her pony away from the butte and toward the Double R buildings in the distance. For an instant Duncan stood looking after her, his face red with embarrassment, and then with a puzzled frown he mounted and followed her.

Later he came up with her at the Double R corral gate and resumed the conversation.

"Then I reckon you ain't got no use for rustlers?" he said.

"Meaning Dakota?" she questioned, a smoldering fire in her eyes.

"I reckon."

"I wish," she said, facing Duncan, her eyes flashing, "that you would kill him!"

"Why—" said Duncan, changing color.

But Sheila had dismounted and was walking rapidly toward the ranch house, leaving Duncan alone with his unfinished speech and his wonder.

CHAPTER IV

Dakota Evens a Score

IN the Red Dog saloon in Lazette some punchers on a holiday played cards at various tables, quietly drinking. Behind the rough bar Pete Moulin, the proprietor stood, talking to his bartender, Blacky.

"So that jasper's back again," commented the proprietor.

"Which?" The bartender followed the proprietor's gaze, which was on a man seated at a card table, his profile toward them, playing cards with several other men. The bartender's face showed perplexity.

Moulin laughed. "I forgot you ain't been here that long," he said. "That was before your time. That fellow settin' sideways to us is Texas Blanca."

"What's he callin' himself 'Texas' for?" queried the bartender. "He looks more like a greaser."

"Breed, I reckon," offered the proprietor. "Claims to have punched cows in Texas before he come here."

"What's he allowin' to be now?"

"Nobody knows. Used to own the Star —Dakota's brand. Sold out to Dakota five years ago. Country got too hot for him an' he had to pull his freight."

"Rustler?"

"You've said something. He's been suspected of it. But nobody's talkin' very loud about it."

"Not safe?"

"Not safe. He's lightning with a six. Got his nerve to come back here, though."

"How's that?"

"Ain't you heard about it? Blanca sold Dakota the Star. Then he pulled his freight immediate. A week or so later Duncan, of the Double R, rides up to Dakota's shack with a bunch of Double R boys an' accuses Dakota of rustlin' Double R cattle. Duncan had found twenty Double R calves runnin' with the Star cattle which had been marked secret. Blanca had run his iron on them an' sold them to Dakota for Star stock. Dakota showed Duncan his bill of sale, all regular, an' of course Duncan couldn't blame him. But there was some hard words passed between Duncan an' Dakota, an' Dakota ain't allowin' they're particular friends since.

"Dakota had to give up the calves, sure enough, an' he did. But sore! He didn't show it much, but he says to me one day, 'I've been stung, Pete,' he says, soft an' even like; 'I've been stung proper, by that damned oiler. Not that I'm carin' for the money end of it; Duncan findin' them calves with my stock has damaged my reputation.' Then he laffed—one of them little short laffs which he gets off sometimes when things don't just suit him—the way he's laffed a couple of times when someone's tried to run a cold lead proposition in on him. He fair freezes my blood when he gets it off.

"Well, he says to me: 'Mebbe I'll be runnin' in with Blanca one of these days.' An' that's all he ever says about it. Likely he expected Blanca to come back. An' sure enough he has. Reckon he thinks that mebbe Dakota didn't get wise to the calf deal."

"In his place," said Blacky, eyeing Blanca furtively, "I'd be makin' some inquiries. Dakota ain't no man to trifle with."

He caught a sign from a man seated at a table and went over to him with a bottle and a glass. While Blacky was engaged in this task the door opened and Dakota came in.

"Friend of yourn here," Moulin greeted him.

Dakota took a flashing glance at the men at the card tables and Moulin saw his lips straighten and harden. But in the next instant he was smiling gravely at the proprietor.

"Thanks, Pete," he said quietly. "But you're some reckless with the English langauge when you're calling him my friend."

He smiled again and then left the bar and strode toward Blanca. The latter continued his card playing, apparently unaware of Dakota's approach, but at the sound of his former victim's voice he turned and looked up slowly, his face wearing a bland smile.

It was plain to Moulin that Blanca had

known all along of Dakota's presence in the saloon—perhaps he had seen him enter. The other card players ceased playing and leaned back in their chairs, watching, for some of them knew something of the calf deal, and there was that in Dakota's greeting to Blanca which warned them of impending trouble.

"Blanca," said Dakota quietly, "you can pay for those calves now."

"Calves?" he said. "What calves, my frien'?" He dropped his cards to the table and turned his chair around, leaning far back in it and hooking his right thumb in his cartridge belt, just above the holster of his pistol. "I theenk it mus' be mistak'."

"Yes," returned Dakota, a slow, grimly humorous smile reaching his face, "it was a mistake. You made it, Blanca. Duncan found it out. Duncan took the calves—they belonged to him. You're going to pay for them."

"I pay for heem?" The bland smile on Blanca's face had slowly faded with the realization that his victim was not to be further misled by him. In place of the smile his face now wore an expression of sneering contempt, and his black eyes had taken on a watchful glitter. He spoke slowly: "I pay for no calves, my frien'."

"You'll pay," said Dakota, an ominously quiet drawl in his voice, "or—"

"Or what?"

"This town ain't big enough for both of us," said Dakota, his eyes cold and alert as they watched Blanca's hand at his cartridge belt. "One of us will leave it by sundown. I reckon that's all."

He deliberately turned his back on Blanca and walked to the door, stepping down into the street. Blanca looked after him, sneering. An instant later Blanca turned and smiled at his companions at the table.

"It ain't my funeral," said one of the card players, "but if I was in your place I'd begin to think that me stayin' here was crowdin' the population of this town by one."

Blanca's teeth gleamed. "My frien'," he said insinuatingly, "it's your deal." His smile grew. "Thees is a nize country. I like it ver' much. I come back here to stay. Dakota—hees got the Star too cheap." He tapped his gun holster significantly. "Tonight Dakota hees go somewhere else. Tomorrow who takes the Star? You?" He pointed to each of the card players in turn. "You?" he questioned. "You take it?" He smiled at their negative signs. "Well, then, Blanca take it. Peste! Dakota give himself till sundown!"

THE six-o'clock was an hour and thirty minutes late. For two hours Sheila Langford had been on the station platform awaiting its coming. Finally it steamed its way through the golden sunshine of the afternoon, and drew alongside the station platform.

A brakeman descended, the conductor strode stiffly to the telegrapher's window, two trunks came out of the baggage car, and a tall man of fifty alighted and was folded in Sheila's welcoming arms. Then the man held Sheila off at arm's length and looked searchingly at her.

"Crying?" he said. "What a welcome!"

"Oh, daddy!" said Sheila. In this moment she was very near to telling him what had happened to her on the day of her arrival at Lazette, but she felt that it was impossible with him looking at her; she could not at a blow cast a shadow over the joy of his first day in the country where, henceforth, he was to make his home.

"Then nothing happened to you after all," he laughed. "Nothing, in spite of my croaking."

"Nothing," she answered.

"You like it here? Duncan has made himself agreeable?"

"It is a beautiful country, though a little lonesome after—after Albany. But Duncan's sister has done her best, and I have been able to get along."

The engine bell clanged and they stood side by side as the train pulled slowly away from the platform.

"This is the moment for which I have been looking for months," he said. "I will look after the baggage." He left her and approached the station agent and together they examined the trunks which had come out of the baggage car.

Sheila watched him while he engaged in this task. She had heard people call him a hard man; she knew that business associates had complained of what they were pleased to call his "sharp methods"; it had even been hinted that his "methods" were irregular.

It made no difference to her, however, what people thought of him, or what they said of him, he had been a kind and in-

dulgent parent to her and she supposed that in business it was everybody's business to look sharply after their own interests.

Sheila had grown to judge her father through the medium of his treatment of her. Her own father—who had died during her infancy—could not have treated her better than had Langford. Since her mother's death some years before, Langford had been both father and mother to her, and her affection for him had flourished in the sunshine of his. No matter what other people thought, she was satisfied with him.

She saw the station agent now, beckoning to the driver of the Double R wagon, and she went over to the edge of the station platform and watched while the trunks were tumbled into the wagon.

The driver was grumbling good naturedly to Langford.

"That darned six-o'clock train is always late," he was saying. "It's a quarter to eight now an' the sun is goin' down. If that train had been on time we could have made part of the trip in the daylight."

The trunks were in, Sheila was helped to the seat by her father, he jumped in himself, and they were off down the street.

The town seemed deserted. Sheila saw a man standing near the front door of a saloon, his hands on his hips. His gaze roved up and down the street and he nervously fingered his cartridge belt.

"Why, it is sundown already!" Sheila heard her father say. "What a sudden change!"

A subconscious sense only permitted Sheila to hear her father's voice, for her thoughts and eyes were just then riveted on another man who had come out of the door of another saloon a little way down the street. She recognized the man as Dakota and exclaimed sharply.

She felt her father turn; heard the driver declare, "It's comin' off," though she had not the slightest idea of his meaning. Then she realized that he had halted the horses; saw that he had turned in his seat and was watching something to the rear of them intently.

"What's wrong?" Her father asked.

"Dakota an' Blanca are havin' a run-in," announced the driver. "Dakota's give Blanca till sundown to get out of town. It's sundown now an' Blanca ain't pulled his freight, an' it's likely that hell will be a-poppin' sorta sudden."

Sheila cowered in her seat, half afraid to look at Dakota—who was walking slowly toward the man who still stood in front of the saloon.

OUT of the corners of her eyes she could see that far down the street men were congregated; they stood in doorways, at convenient corners, their eyes directed toward Dakota and the other man.

Dakota reached a point about thirty feet from the man in front of the saloon—Blanca. As Dakota continued to approach, Sheila observed an evil smile flash suddenly to Blanca's face; saw a glint of metal in the faint light; heard the crash of his revolver; shuddered at the flame spurt. She expected to see Dakota fall—hoped that he might. Instead, she saw him smile. And then his hand dropped swiftly to the butt of the pistol at his right hip.

Sheila's eyes closed; she swayed and felt her father's arm come out and grasp her to keep her from falling. She held her breath in an agony of suspense, and it seemed an age until she heard a crashing report—and then another. Then silence.

Unable longer to resist looking, Sheila opened her eyes. She saw Dakota walk forward and stand over Blanca, looking down at him, his pistol still in hand. Blanca was face down in the dust of the street. Dakota sheathed his weapon and, without looking toward the wagon in which Sheila sat, turned and strode unconcernedly down the street. A man came out of the door of the saloon in front of which Blanca's body lay, looking down at it curiously. Other men were running toward the spot; there were shouts, oaths.

For the first time in her life Sheila had seen a man killed—murdered—and there came to her a recollection of Dakota's words that night in the cabin: "Have you ever seen a man die?" A sob shook her, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh! The brute!"

"Hey!" From a great distance the driver's voice seemed to come. "Hey! What's that? Well, mebbe. But I reckon Blanca won't rustle any more cattle. God!" he added in an awed voice; "both of them hit him!"

Blanca was dead then, there could be no doubt of that. Sheila felt herself swaying. She heard her father's voice raised in alarm, felt his arm come out again and grasp her, and then darkness settled around her.

When she recovered consciousness her father's arms were still around her and the buckboard was in motion. Dusk had come.

"I reckon she's plumb shocked," she heard the driver say.

"I don't wonder," returned Langford, and Sheila felt a shiver run over him. "Great guns!" Sheila wondered at the tone he used. "That man is a marvel with a pistol! Did you notice how cool he took it?"

"Cool!" The driver laughed. "If you get acquainted with Dakota you'll find out that he's cool. He's an iceberg, that's what he is!"

"They'll arrest him, I suppose?" queried Langford.

"Arrest him! What for? Didn't he give Blanca his chance? That's why I'm tellin' you he's cool!"

It was past two o'clock when the buckboard pulled up at the Double R corral gates and Langford helped Sheila down. She was still pale and trembling and did not remain downstairs to witness her father's introduction to Duncan's sister, but went immediately to her room. Sleep was far from her, however, for she kept dwelling over and over on the odd fortune which had killed Blanca and allowed Dakota to live.

CHAPTER V

Kindred Spirits

LOOKING rather more rugged than when he had arrived at the station at Lazette two weeks before, his face tanned, but still retaining the smooth, sleek manner which he had brought with him from the East, David Dowd Langford sat in a big rocking chair on the lower gallery of the Double R ranch house, mentally appraising Duncan, who was seated near by, his profile toward Langford.

"So this Ben Doubler has been a thorn in your side?" questioned Langford softly.

"That's just it," returned Duncan, with an evil smile. "And now I'm willing him to you. I don't know when I've been more tickled over getting rid of a man."

"Well," said Langford, "I suppose I ought to feel extremely grateful to you—especially since when I was negotiating the purchase of the ranch you didn't hint of a nester being on the property."

"I didn't sell Doubler to you," said Duncan.

Langford's smile was shallow. "But I get him just the same," he said. "As a usual thing it is pretty hard to get rid of a nester, isn't it?"

"I haven't been able to get rid of this one," returned Duncan. "He don't seem to be influenced by anything I say, or do. Some obstinate."

"Tried everything?"

"Yes."

"The law?"

Duncan made a gesture of disgust. "The law!" he said. "What for? He's got as much right to the open range as I have—as you will have. I bought a section, and he took up a quarter section. The only difference between us is that I own mine—or did own it until you bought it—and he ain't proved on his. He is on the other side of the river and you are on this. He's got the best grass land in the country—and plenty of water."

"His rights, then," remarked Langford slowly, "equal yours—or mine."

"That's so," agreed Duncan.

"Which reduces the profits of the Double R," pursued Langford.

"I reckon that's right."

"And you knew that when you sold me the Double R," continued Langford, his voice smooth and silky.

Duncan flashed a grin at the imperturbable face of the new owner. "I reckon I wasn't entirely ignorant of it," he said.

"That's bad business," remarked Langford.

"What *is?*" Duncan's face reddened slightly. "You mean that it was bad business for me to sell when I knowed Doubler owned land near the Double R?"

Langford's eyes were narrowed to slits. "I meant that it was bad business to allow Doubler's presence on the Two Forks to affect the profits of the Double R. Perhaps I have been stung—as you call it—but if I have been I am not complaining."

Duncan's eyes glinted with satisfaction. "I'm admitting," he said, "that Doubler being there is bad business. But how are you going to prevent him staying there?"

"Have you tried"—Langford looked obliquely at Duncan, drawling significantly—"force?"

"I have tried everything, I told you."

Duncan gazed at Langford with a new interest. It was the first time since the new owner had come to the Double R that he had dropped the mask of sleek smooth-

ness behind which he concealed his passions. Even now the significance was more in his voice than in his words.

"I'm glad to see that you appreciate the situation," he said, smiling craftily. "Some men are mighty careful not to do anything to hurt anybody else."

LANGFORD favored Duncan with a steady gaze, which the latter returned, and both smiled.

"Business," presently said Langford, "good business, demands the application of certain methods which are not always agreeable to the opposition. There ought to be a good many ways of making it plain to Doubler that he isn't wanted in this section of the country," he insinuated.

"I've tried to make some of the ways plain," said Duncan with a cold grin. "I got to the end of my string and hadn't any more things to try. That's why I decided to sell. I wanted to get away where I wouldn't be bothered. But I reckon that you'll be able to fix up something for him."

"It is plain from what you have been telling me," Langford said, "that there is no possibility of you succeeding in reaching a satisfactory agreement with Doubler, and therefore I will have to deal with him personally. I shall ride over some day and have a talk with him."

The prospect of becoming involved with the nester gave Langford a throb of joy. All his life he had been engaged in the task of overcoming business obstacles and he had reached the conclusion that the situation which now confronted him was nothing more or less than business. It offered the opportunity for cold-blooded, merciless planning for personal gain, and it would give him an opportunity to apply his peculiar genius, to grapple, to battle, and finally overthrow the opposing force.

Though he had allowed Duncan to see nothing of the emotions that rioted within him over the discovery that he had been victimized by the latter, there was in his mind a feeling of deep resentment against the former owner; he felt that he could no longer trust him. He had already arranged with Duncan to remain at the Double R throughout the season, but he purposed to leave him out of any dealings that he might have with Doubler. He smiled as he looked at Duncan.

"I like this country," he said. "I was rather afraid at first that I would find it dull after the East. But this situation gives promise of action."

Duncan was watching him with a crafty smile. "You reckon on running him off, or—" He leered at Langford significantly.

The latter's face was impassive, his smile dry. "Eh?" he said, abstractedly, as though his thoughts had been wandering from the subject. "Why, I really haven't given a thought to the method by which I ought to deal with Doubler. Perhaps," he added with a genial smile, "I may make a friend of him."

He observed Duncan's scowl and his smile grew.

CHAPTER VI

Bogged Down

EACH day during the two weeks that her father had been at the Double R Sheila had accompanied him on his rides of exploration. She had grown tired of the continued companionship. She longed to ride out alone where she could brood over her secret. The possession of it had taken the flavor out of the joys of this new life, had left it flat and filled with bitter memories.

She had detected a change in her father —he seemed coarse, domineering, entirely unlike his usual self.

She had developed a positive dislike for Duncan, which she took no trouble to conceal. He had accompanied her and her father on all their trips and his manner toward her had grown to be one of easy familiarity. This was another reason why she wanted to ride alone.

Determined to carry out this decision, she was this morning saddling her pony at the corral gates when she observed Duncan standing near, watching her.

"You might have let me throw that saddle on," he said.

"I prefer to put the saddle on myself," she returned.

"Cross this morning, ain't you?" he taunted.

There was no reply. She continued to work with the saddle, lacing the latigo strings and tightening the cinches.

"We're riding down to the box canyon on the other side of the basin this morning," said Duncan. "We've got some strays penned up there. But your dad won't be ready for half an hour yet. You're in something of a hurry, it seems."

"You are going, I suppose?" questioned Sheila.

"I reckon."

"I don't see," said Sheila, straightening and facing him, "why you have to go with father everywhere."

Duncan flushed. "Your father's aiming to learn the business," he said. "I'm showing him, telling him what I know about it."

"And I suppose you have a corner on all the knowledge of ranch life," suggested Sheila sarcastically.

He flushed darkly, but did not answer.

After Sheila had completed the tightening of the cinches she led the pony beside the corral fence, mounted, and without looking at Duncan started to ride away.

"Wait!" he shouted. She drew the pony to a halt.

"I thought you was going with your father?" he said.

"You are mistaken." She could not repress a smile over the expression of disappointment on his face, She urged her pony forward, leaving him standing beside the corral gates watching her with a frown.

She sat erect in the saddle, experiencing a feeling of elation which brought the color into her face and brightened her eyes. It was the first time since her arrival at the Double R that she had been able to ride out alone, and it was also the first time that she really appreciated the vastness and beauty of the country. For the trail to the river, which she had decided she would follow, led through a fertile country where the bunch grass grew long and green, and where the low wooded hills and the shallow gullies seemed to hint at mystery.

When she reached the river she crossed it at a shallow and urged her pony up a sloping bank and out upon a grass plain that spread away like the level of a great, green sea.

About noon, when she became convinced that she had seen everything worth seeing in that section of the country, she wheeled her pony and headed it back toward the river. She reached it after a time and urged her beast along its banks, searching for the shallow which she had crossed some time before. A dim trail led along the river and she felt certain that if she followed it long enough it would lead her to the crossing, but after riding half an hour and encountering nothing but hills and rock cliffs she began to doubt. But she rode on for another half hour and then, slightly disturbed over her inability to find the shallow, she halted the pony and looked about her.

THE country was strange and unfamiliar and a sudden misgiving assailed her. Had she lost her idea of direction? She looked up at the sun and saw that it was slightly past the zenith on its downward path. Certain that she had missed the shallow because of her interest in other things, she urged her pony about and cantered it slowly over the back trail. A little later, seeing an arroyo which seemed to give promise of leading to the shallow she sought, she descended it and found that it led to a flat and thence to the river. The crossing seemed familiar, and yet she supposed that one crossing would do quite as well as another, and so she continued on toward it.

There was a fringe of shrubbery at the edge of what appeared to have once been a swamp, though now it was dry and made fairly good footing for her pony. The animal acted strangely, however, when she tried to urge it through the fringing shrubbery, and she was compelled to use her quirt vigorously.

Once at the water's edge she halted the pony and viewed the crossing. It was very shallow, not over thirty feet wide, she estimated, and through the clear water she could easily see the hard, sandy bottom. It puzzled her slightly to observe that there were no wagon tracks or hoof prints in the sand anywhere around her, as there would be were the crossing used.

She urged the pony gently with her booted heel and voice, but the little animal would not budge. Impatient over its obstinacy, she again applied the quirt vigorously. Stung to desperation the pony stood erect for an instant, pawing the air frantically with its fore hoofs, and then, as the quirt continued to lash its flanks, it lunged forward, snorting in apparent fright, made two or three eccentric leaps, splashing water high over Sheila's head, and then came to a sudden stop in the middle of the stream.

Sheila, convinced that the pony was merely exhibiting obstinacy, applied the quirt to its flanks. The animal floundered and struggled, but did not move out of its tracks.

Evidently something had gone wrong.

Sheila peered over the pony's mane into the water, which was still clear in spite of the pony's struggling, and sat suddenly erect, stifling a cry of amazement. The pony was mired fast! Its legs, to a point just above the knees, had disappeared into the river bottom!

As she straightened, a chilling fear clutching at her heart, she felt the cold water of the river splashing against her booted legs. And now knowledge came to her in a sudden, sickening flood. She had ridden her pony fairly into a bed of quicksand!

She was surprised at her coolness. She realized that the situation was precarious, for though she had never before experienced a quicksand, she had read much of them in books, and knew that the pony was hopelessly mired. But it seemed that there could be no immediate danger, for the river bottom looked smooth and hard, and she was so certain that the footing was good that she pulled her feet out of the stirrups, swung around, and stepped down into the water.

She had stepped lightly, bearing only a little of her weight on the foot while holding to the saddle, but the foot sank instantly into the sand and the water darkened around it. She tried again in another spot, putting a little more weight on her foot this time. She went in almost to the knee and was surprised to find that she had to exert some little strength to pull the foot out, there was so great a suction.

Escape seemed to be impossible. Looking backward toward the bank she had left, she saw that the pony must have come fifteen or twenty feet in the two or three plunges it had made.

In front of her was a stretch of water of nearly the same width as that which lay behind her. To the right and left the grayish-black sand spread far, but only a short distance beyond where she could discern the sand there were rocks that stuck above the water with little ripples around them.

The rocks were too far away to be of any assistance to her, however, and her heart sank when she realized that her only hope of escape lay directly ahead.

She leaned over and laid her head against the pony's neck, smoothing and patting its shoulders. The animal whinnied appealingly and she stifled a sob of remorse over her action in forcing it into the treacherous sand, for it had sensed the danger while obeying her blindly.

HOW long she lay with her head against the pony's neck she did not know, but when she finally sat erect again she found that the water was touching the hem of her riding skirt and that her feet, dangling at each side of the pony, were deep in the sand of the river bottom. With a cry of fright she drew them out and crossed them before her on the pommel of the saddle. With the movement the pony sank several inches, it seemed to her; she saw the water suddenly flow over its back; heard it neigh loudly, appealingly, with a note of anguish and terror which seemed almost human.

They would both die, she knew—horribly. They would presently sink beneath the surface of the sand, the water would flow over them and obliterate all traces of their graves, and no one would ever know what had become of them.

Some time later—it might have been five minutes or an hour—Sheila could not have told—she heard the pony neigh again, and this time it seemed there was a new note in the sound—a note of hope! She raised her head and looked up. And there on the bank before her, uncoiling his rope from the saddle horn and looking very white and grim, was Dakota!

Sheila sat motionless, not knowing whether to cry or laugh, finally compromising with the appeal, uttered with all the composure at her command:

"Won't you please get us out of here?"

"That's what I am aiming to do," he said, and never did a voice sound sweeter in her ears.

He seemed not in the least excited, continuing to uncoil his rope and recoil it again into larger loops. "Hold your hands over your head!" came his command.

She did as she was bidden. He had not dismounted from his pony, but had ridden up to the very edge of the quicksand, and as she raised her hands she saw him twirl the rope once, watched as it sailed out, settled down around her waist, and was drawn tight.

There was now a grim smile on his face. "You're in for a wetting," he said. "I'm sorry—but it can't be helped. Keep your head above the water."

His pony was in motion instantly, pull-

ing strongly, following out its custom of dragging a roped steer, and Sheila slipped off the saddle and into the water, trying to keep her feet under her. But she overbalanced and fell with a splash, and in this manner was dragged, gasping, strangling, and dripping wet, to the bank.

Dakota was off his pony long before she had reached the solid ground and was at her side before she had cleared the water, helping her to her feet and loosening the noose about her waist.

"Don't, please!" she said frigidly, as his hand touched her.

"Then I won't." He smiled and stepped back while she fumbled with the rope and finally threw it off. "What made you try that shallow?" he asked.

"I suppose I have a right to ride where I please?" He had saved her life, of course, and she was very grateful to him, but that was no reason why he should presume to speak familiarly to her.

"Now, you don't look dignified, for a fact," he grinned, brazenly.

"It isn't the first time that I have amused you!" she said with angry sarcasm.

A cloud passed over his face.

"So you haven't forgotten?" he said.

She did not deign to answer, but turned her back to him and looked at her partially submerged pony.

"Want to try it again?" he asked.

She turned slowly and looked at him, her eyes flashing.

"Will you please stop being silly!" she said coolly. "If you were human you would be trying to get my pony out of that sand instead of standing there and trying to be smart!"

"Did you think that I was going to let him drown?" He coiled his rope and hung it from the pommel of the saddle. "I certainly am not going to let your horse drown," he assured her, "for in this country horses are sometimes more valuable than people."

"Then why didn't you save the pony first?" she demanded hotly.

"How could I," he returned, "with you looking so appealingly at me?"

She turned abruptly and left him, walking to a flat rock and seating herself upon it, wringing the water from her skirts, trying to get her hair out of her eyes, feeling very miserable, and wishing devoutly that Dakota might drown himself—after he had pulled the pony from the quicksand.

But Dakota did not drown himself. Nor did he pull the pony out of the quicksand. She watched him as he rode to the water's edge and looked at the animal. Her heart sank when he turned and looked gravely at her.

"I reckon your pony's done for, ma'am," he said. "There isn't anything of him above the sand but his head and a little of his neck. He's too far gone, ma'am."

SHEILA stood up, wet and excited. "Can't you do something?" she pleaded. "Couldn't you pull him out with your lariat—like you did me?"

"What do you reckon would have happened to you if I had tried to pull you out by the neck?" he asked.

"But can't you do *something?*" she pleaded.

His face changed expression and he tapped one of his holsters significantly. "There's only this left, I reckon. Pulling him out by the neck would break it, sure."

Sheila shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"It's too bad," he said finally. "I don't like to shoot him, any more than you want to see it done. I reckon, though, that the pony would thank me for doing it if he could have anything to say about it." He walked over close to her, speaking in a low voice. "You can't stay here, or course. You'll have to take my horse, and you'll have to go right now, if you don't want to be around when the pony—"

"Please don't," she said, interrupting him.

She disliked to accept his offer of the pony, but there seemed to be no other way.

"I've got to tell you one thing," he said presently. "If Duncan is responsible for your safety in this country he isn't showing very good judgment in letting you run around alone. Someone ought to take care of you."

"As you did, for example," she retorted, filled with anger over his present solicitation for her welfare, as contrasted to his treatment of her on another occasion.

A slow red filled his cheeks. Evidently he did possess *some* self-respect, after all

"But I didn't hurt you, anyway," he said, eyeing her steadily.

"Not if you call ruining a woman's name not 'hurting' her," she answered bitterly.

"I am sorry for that, Miss Sheila," he said earnestly. "I had an idea that night

and still have it, for that matter—that I was an instrument— Well, I had an idea, that's all. I told the parson to get out of the country, so he wouldn't do any gassing about it. And I haven't been over to Dry Bottom to have the marriage recorded—and I am not going to go. So that you can have it set aside at any time."

Yes, she could have the marriage annulled, she knew that. But the contemplation of her release from the tie that bound her to him did not lessen the gravity of the offense in her eyes. She told herself that she hated him with a remorseless passion which would never cease until he ceased to live. No action of his could repair the damage he had done to her. She told him so, plainly.

"I didn't know you were so blood-thirsty as that," he laughed. "Maybe it would be a good thing for you if I did die—or get killed. But I'm not allowing that I'm ready to die yet, and certainly am not going to let anybody kill me if I can prevent it. I reckon you're not thinking of doing the killing yourself?"

"If I told my father—" she began, but hesitated when she saw his lips suddenly straighten and harden and his eyes light with a deep contempt.

"So you haven't told your father?" he laughed. "I was sure you had taken him into your confidence by this time. But I reckon it's a mighty good thing that you didn't — for your father. Like as not if you'd tell him he'd get some riled and come right over to see me, yearning for my blood. And then I'd have to shoot him up some. And that would sure be too bad—you loving him as you do."

"I suppose you would shoot him like you shot that poor fellow in Lazette," she taunted, bitterly.

"Like I did that poor fellow in Lazette," he said, with broad, ironic emphasis. "You saw me shoot Blanca, of course, for you were there. But you don't know what made me shoot him, and I am not going to tell you—it's none of your business."

"Indeed!" Her voice was burdened with contempt. "I suppose you take a certain pride in your ability to murder people."

"Lots of people ought to be murdered," he drawled.

She shuddered and walked to the pony—his pony.

"If you have quite finished I believe I will be going," she said. "I will have one of the men bring your horse to you."

"I believe I have quite finished," he returned, mimicking her cold, precise manner of speech.

She started to ride away without even glancing at him. His voice freighted with mock bitterness drawled after her:

"And she didn't even thank me."

She turned and made a grimace at him. He bowed and smiled.

"You are entirely welcome," she said.

He was standing on the edge of the quicksand, watching her, when she reached the long rise upon which she had sat on her pony on a day some weeks before, and when she turned he waved a hand to her. A little later she vanished over the rise, and she had not ridden very far when she heard the dull report of his pistol. She shivered, and rode on.

CHAPTER VII

Sheila Fans a Flame

It was late in the afternoon when Sheila rode up to the Double R corral gates and was met by her father and Duncan. She told them the story of her danger and subsequent rescue by Dakota and she saw Langford's eyes narrow with a strange light.

"Dakota!" he said. "Isn't that the chap who shot that half-breed over in Lazette the day I came?"

To Sheila's nod he ejaculated: "He's a trump!"

"He is a brute!" As the words escaped her lips—she had not meant to utter them—Sheila caught a glint in Duncan's eyes which told her that she had echoed the latter's sentiment.

"A brute, eh?" laughed Langford. "It strikes me that I wouldn't so characterize a man who had saved my life."

"He ain't so awful much of a man," remarked Duncan.

Langford turned and looked at Duncan with a comprehending smile. "Evidently you owe Dakota nothing, my dear Duncan," he said.

The latter's face darkened, and with Sheila listening he told the story of the calf deal, which had indirectly brought about the death of Blanca.

"For a long time we had suspected Texas Blanca of rustling," said Duncan, "but we couldn't catch him with the goods. Five years ago, after the spring round-up, I

branded a bunch of calves with a secret mark, and then we rode sign on Blanca.

"We had him then, for the calves disappeared and some of the boys found some of them in Blanca's corral, but we delayed, hoping he would run off more, and while we were waiting he sold out to Dakota. We didn't know that at the time; didn't find it out until we went over to take Blanca and found Dakota living in his cabin. He had a bill of sale from Blanca all right, showing that he'd bought the calves from him. It looked regular, but we had our doubts, and Dakota and me came pretty near having a run-in. If the boys hadn't interfered—"

He hesitated and looked at Sheila, and as her gaze met his steadily his eyes wavered and a slow red came into his face, for the recollection of what had actually occurred at the meeting between him and Dakota was not pleasant.

"So he wasn't a rustler, after all?" said Sheila pleasantly. For some reason which she could not entirely explain, she suspected that Duncan had left many things out of his story of his clash with Dakota.

"Well, no," admitted Duncan grudgingly. "But him and Blanca probably framed up—making believe that Blanca had sold him the Star brand."

"I don't believe it!" Sheila's eyes met Duncan's and the latter's wavered.

"He doesn't appear to me to be the sort of man who would steal cows," she said. "Although," she continued significantly, "it does seem that he is the sort of man I would not care to trifle with—if I were a man. You told me yourself, if you remember, that you were not taking any chances with him. And now you accuse him."

"Meaning that I'm afraid of him, I reckon?" sneered Duncan.

"Afraid?" She appeared to hesitate. "Well, no," she said, surveying him with an appraising eye in which the mischief was partly concealed, "I do not believe that you are afraid. Perhaps you are merely careful where he is concerned. But I am certain that even if you were afraid of him you would not refuse to take his pony back. I promised to send it back, you know."

A deep red suddenly suffused Duncan's face.

"I will have one of the boys take the pony over to him the first thing in the morning," he said.

Sheila smiled sweetly. "Please don't bother," she said. "Perhaps I shall decide to ride over that way myself. I should not care to have you meet Dakota if you are afraid of him."

Her rippling laugh caused the red in Duncan's face to deepen. She gave him no time to reply. She turned and walked toward the ranch house. Both Duncan and Langford watched her until she vanished, and then Langford turned to Duncan.

"What on earth have you done to her?" he questioned.

But Duncan was savagely pulling the saddle from Dakota's pony and did not answer.

After breakfast on the following morning she was standing near the windmill, when she saw Duncan riding away from the ranch house, leading Dakota's pony. She started toward the corral gates, and hailed him tauntingly:

"Please tell him to accept my thanks." Duncan turned his head, and continued on his way.

HALF an hour after the departure of Duncan Sheila pressed a loafing puncher into service and directed him to rope a gentle pony for her. After the puncher had secured a suitable appearing animal and had placed a saddle and bridle on it, she mounted and rode up the river.

Duncan was not particularly pleased over his errand. Following the incident of the theft of the calves by Blanca, Duncan had taken pains to insinuate publicly that Dakota's purchase of the Star from the half-breed had been a clever ruse to avert suspicion, intimating that a partnership existed between Dakota and Blanca, and until now Duncan had been very careful to avoid a meeting with the man whom he had maligned.

Therefore his spirits were not the best when he finally rode up to the door of the latter's cabin.

There was hope in his heart that Dakota might prove to be absent, and when, after calling once and receiving no answer, he dismounted and hitched Dakota's pony to a rail of the corral fence, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

He was congratulating himself on his good fortune in reaching Dakota's cabin during a time when the latter was absent, when he heard a slight sound behind him.

He turned rapidly, to see Dakota standing in the doorway of the cabin, watching him with cold, level eyes, one of his heavy six-shooters in hand.

Duncan's face went slowly pale. He did not speak at once and when he did he was surprised at his hoarseness.

"I've brought your cayuse back," he said finally.

"So I see," returned Dakota. "I don't recollect, though, that I sent word to have *you* bring him back."

"I wasn't tickled to death over the job," returned Duncan.

Now that his first surprise was over and Dakota had betrayed no sign of resenting his visit, Duncan felt easier.

"Then why did you come over here? I reckon there wasn't anyone else to send my horse over by?"

Duncan flushed. "Sheila Langford sent me," he admitted reluctantly.

Dakota's eyes lighted with incredibility. "I reckon you're a liar," he said with cold emphasis.

Duncan's gaze went to the pistol in Dakota's hand and his lips curled. He knew that he was perfectly safe so long as he made no hostile move, for in spite of his derogatory remarks about the man he was aware that he never used his weapons without provocation.

Therefore he forced a smile. "You ain't running no Blanca deal on me," he said. "Calling me a liar ain't going to get no rise out of me. But she sent me, just the same. We was gassing about you and she told me I was scared to bring your cayuse back." He laughed mirthlessly. "I reckon I've proved that I ain't any scared."

"No," said Dakota with a cold grin, "you ain't scared. You know that there won't be any shooting done unless you get careless with that gun you carry." He watched Duncan's face for signs of insincerity. He saw no such signs and his expression became mocking. "So she sent you over here? Why, I reckon you're a kind of handy man to have around—sort of ladies' man — running errands and such."

Duncan's face bloated with anger, but he dared not show open resentment. In the veilness of his mind he had drawn many imaginary pictures of what had occurred between Dakota and Sheila immediately after her rescue by the latter.

"I reckon," he said hoarsely, "that you take a heap of interest in Sheila."

"That's part of your business, I suppose?" Dakota's voice was suddenly hard.

"I reckon," he said with a sneer, "that I ain't as much interested in her as you are."

"Meaning what?" Dakota demanded harshly, sharply, for he imagined that perhaps Sheila had told of her marriage to him, and the thought that Duncan should have been selected by her to share the secret maddened him.

"Meaning that she ain't admiring you for nothing," flared Duncan incautiously. "Meaning that any woman which has been pulled out of a quicksand like you pulled her out might be expected to favor you with—"

The sunlight flashed on Dakota's pistol as it leaped from his right hand to his left and was holstered with a jerk. And with the same motion his clenched fist was jammed with savage force against Duncan's lips, cutting short the slanderous words and sending him in a heap to the dust of the corral yard.

With a cry of rage Duncan grasped for his pistol and drew it out, but the hand holding it was stamped violently into the earth, the arm bent and twisted until the fingers released the weapon. And then Dakota stood over him, looking down at him with narrowed, chilling eyes, his face white and hard, his anger gone as quickly as it had come. He said no word while Duncan clambered awkwardly to his feet and mounted his horse.

"I'm telling you something," he said quietly, as Duncan lifted the reins with his uninjured hand, turning his horse to depart. "You and me have never hitched very well and there isn't any chance of us ever falling on each other's necks. I think what I've done to you about squares us for that calf deal. I've been yearning to hand you something before you left the country, but I didn't expect you'd give me the chance in just this way. I'm warning you that the next time you shove your coyote nose into my business I'll muss it up some. That applies to Miss Sheila. If I ever hear of you getting her name on your dirty tongue again I'll tear you apart. I reckon that's all." He drew his pistol and balanced it in his right hand. "It makes me feel some reckless to be talking to you," he added, a glint of intolerance in his eyes. "You'd better travel before I change my mind.

"You don't need to mention this to Miss Sheila," he said mockingly, as Duncan

urged his horse away from the corral gate; "just let her go on — thinking you're a man."

CHAPTER VIII

Strictly Business

FOR two or three quiet weeks Sheila did not see much of Duncan, and her father bothered her very little. Several nights on the gallery of the ranch house she had seen the two men sitting very close together, and on one or two occasions she had overheard scraps of conversation carried on between them in which Doubler's name was mentioned.

She had become acquainted with Doubler. Since discontinuing her rides with her father and Duncan she had gone out every day alone, though she was careful to avoid any crossing in the river which looked the least suspicious. Such crossings as she could ford were few, and for that reason she was forced to ride most of the time to the Two Forks, where there was an excellent shallow, with long slopes sweeping up to the plains on both sides.

The first time that she crossed at the Two Forks she had come upon a small adobe cabin situated a few hundred yards back from the water's edge.

Sheila would have fled from the vicinity, for there was still fresh in her mind a recollection of another cabin in which she had once passed many fearsome hours, but while she hesitated, on the verge of flight, Doubler came to the door, and when she saw that he was an old man with a kindly face, much of her perturbation vanished, and she remained to talk.

"I reckon you're that Langford girl?" he said.

"Yes," returned Sheila, wondering. "I am Sheila Langford. But who told you?"

"Dakota told me."

"Oh!" A chill came into her voice which instantly attracted Doubler's attention.

"You know Dakota?"

"I have met him."

"You don't like him, I reckon?"

"No."

"Well, now," commented Doubler, "I reckon I've got things mixed. But from Dakota's talk I took it that you an' him was pretty thick."

"What has he been saying?" she demanded coldly.

"Nothing, ma'am. That is, nothin' which any man wouldn't say about you, once he'd seen you an' talked some to you." Doubler surveyed her with sparkling, appreciative eyes.

"I reckon I can tell you what he said, ma'am, without you gettin' awful mad. He didn't say nothin' except that he'd taken an awful shine to you."

"Shine?" There was a world of wonder in Sheila's voice. "Would you mind telling me what 'taking a shine' to anyone means?"

"Why, no, I reckon I don't mind, ma'am. 'Takin' a shine' to you means that he's some stuck on you—likes you. An' I reckon you can't blame him much for doin' that."

Sheila did not answer, though a sudden flood of red to her face made the use of mere words entirely unnecessary so far as Doubler was concerned, for he smiled wisely.

Sheila fled down the trail toward the crossing without a parting word to Doubler, leaving him standing at the door squinting with amusement at her

She quickly grew to like Doubler. He showed a fatherly interest in her and always greeted her with a smile when during her rides she came to his cabin, or when she met him, as she did frequently, on the open range. One morning, however, she rode up to the door of the cabin and Doubler's face was serious. He stood quietly in the doorway, watching her as she sat on her pony, not offering to assist her down as he usually did, and she knew instantly that something had happened to disturb his peace of mind.

"Ma'am," he said, and Sheila detected regret in his voice, "I'm a heap sorry, but of course you won't be comin' here any more."

"I don't see why!" returned Sheila in surprise. "I like to come here. But, of course, if you don't want me—"

"It ain't that," he interrupted quickly. "I thought you knowed. Your dad an' Duncan was over to see me yesterday."

"I didn't know that," returned Sheila. "But I can't see why a visit from father should—"

"He's wantin' me to pull my freight out of the country," said Doubler. "An' of course I ain't doin' it. Therefore I'm severin' diplomatic relations with your family."

"I don't see why—" began Sheila.

"Of course you don't," Doubler told her. "You're new here an' don't understand such things. But in this country when a little owner has got some land which a big owner wants—an' can't buy—there's likely to be trouble. I ain't proved on my land yet, an' if your dad can run me off he'll be pretty apt to grab it somehow or other. But he ain't runnin' me off an' so there's a heap of trouble comin'."

"I don't see why father should want your land," Sheila told him. "There is plenty of land here."

"There ain't enough for some people," grimly laughed Doubler. "Some people is hawgs—askin' your pardon, ma'am. I wasn't expectin' your father to be like that, after seein' you. I was hopin' that we'd be able to get along."

"I'll see father about it. I am sure that father will not make any trouble for you—he isn't that kind of man."

"He's that kind of a man, sure enough," said Doubler gravely. "I reckon I've got him sized up right. He ain't in no way like you, ma'am. If you hadn't told me I reckon I wouldn't have knowed he is your father."

"He is my stepfather," admitted Sheila.

"I knowed it!" declared Doubler. "I'm too old to be fooled by what I see in a man's face—or in a woman's face either. Don't you go to say anything about this business to him. He's bound to try to run me off. He done said so. I don't know when I ever heard a man talk any meaner than he did. Said that if I didn't sell he'd make things mighty unpleasant for me. An' so I reckon there's goin' to be some fun."

Sheila did not remain long at Doubler's cabin, for her mind was in a riot of rage and resentment against her father for his attitude toward Doubler, and she cut short her ride in the hope of being able to have a talk with him before he left the ranch house. But when she returned she was told by Duncan's sister that Langford had departed some hours before — alone. He had not mentioned his destination.

BEN DOUBLER had omitted an important detail from his story of Langford's visit to his cabin, for he had not cared to frighten Sheila unnecessarily. But as Langford rode toward Doubler's cabin this morning his thoughts persisted in dwelling on Doubler's final words to him, spoken as he and Duncan had turned their horses to leave the nester's cabin the day before:

"If it's goin' to be war, Langford, it ain't goin' to be no pussy-kitten affair. I'm warnin' you to stay away from the Two Forks. If I ketch you or any of your men nosin' around there I'm goin' to bore you some rapid."

All his life Langford had heard threats from the lips of his victims, and thus far they had remained only threats. He had determined to see Doubler this morning, for he had noticed that the nester had appeared ill at ease in the presence of Duncan, and he anticipated that alone he could force him to accept terms. When he reached the crossing at Two Forks he urged his pony through its waters, his face wearing a confident smile.

There was an open stretch of grass land between the crossing and Doubler's cabin, and when Langford urged his pony up the sloping bank of the river he saw the nester standing near the door of the cabin, watching. Langford was about to force his pony to a faster pace, when he saw Doubler raise a rifle to his shoulder. Still, he continued to ride forward, but he pulled the pony up shortly when he saw the flame spurt from the muzzle of the rifle and heard the shrill hiss of the bullet as it passed dangerously near to him.

No words were needed, and neither man spoke any. Langford wheeled his pony, and with a white, scared face, rapidly recrossed the river. Once on the crest of the hill on the opposite side he turned, and trembling with rage and fear, shook a clenched hand at Doubler. The latter's reply was a strident laugh.

Langford returned to the ranch house, riding slowly, though in his heart was a riot of rage and hatred against the nester. It was war, to be sure.

The ride to the ranch house took long, but by the time Langford arrived there he had regained his composure, saying nothing to anyone concerning his adventure.

For three days he kept his own counsel, riding out alone, taciturn, giving much thought to the situation. Sheila had intended to speak to him regarding the trouble with Doubler, but his manner repulsed her and she kept silent, hoping that the mood would pass.

On the morning of the fifth day after his adventure with Doubler he was sitting

on the ranch house gallery with Duncan, enjoying an after-breakfast cigar, when he said casually to the latter:

"I take it that folks in this country are mighty careless with their weapons."

Duncan grinned. "You might call it careless," he returned. "But I reckon that when a man draws a gun here he draws it with a pretty definite purpose."

"I have heard," continued Langford slowly, "that there are men in this country who do not hesitate to kill other people for money."

"Such men drift in occasionally," Duncan returned. "Usually, though, they don't stay long."

"I suppose there are none of that breed around here—in Lazette, for instance. It struck me that Dakota was extraordinarily handy with a gun."

Duncan's eyes flashed with venom. "I reckon Dakota's nothing but a damned sneak!"

LANGFORD did not allow his smile to be seen; he had not forgotten the incident of the returning of Dakota's horse by Duncan.

"He's a dead shot, though," he suggested.

"I'm allowing that," grudgingly returned Duncan. "And," he added, "it's been hinted that all his shooting scrapes haven't been on the level."

"He is not straight, then?" said Langford, his eyes gleaming. "Not 'square,' as you say in this country?"

"I reckon there ain't nothing square about him," returned Duncan, glad of an opportunity to defame his enemy.

Langford rode out again that day, taking the river trail and passing Dakota's cabin, but Dakota himself was nowhere to be seen and at dusk Langford returned to the Double R. He retired early, to Duncan's surprise, and the next morning, without announcing his plans to anyone, saddled his pony and rode away toward the river trail.

He took a circuitous route to reach it. Beyond the quicksand crossing he came suddenly upon Dakota's cabin. Dakota himself was repairing a saddle in the shade of the cabin wall, and for all that Langford could see he was entirely unaware of his approach. He saw Dakota look up when he passed the corral gate, and when he reached a point about twenty feet distant he observed a faint smile on Dakota's face.

"Howdy, stranger," came the latter's voice.

"How are you, my friend?" greeted Langford easily.

He dismounted from his pony, hitched the animal to a rail of the corral fence, and approached Dakota.

Dakota apparently took little interest in his visitor, for keeping his seat on the box upon which he had been sitting when Langford had first caught sight of him, he continued to give his attention to the saddle.

"I'm from the Double R," offered Langford.

"I noticed that," responded Dakota.

"How?"

"I reckon that you've forgot that your horse has got a brand on him?"

"You've got keen eyes, my friend," laughed Langford.

"A man don't have to have such terribly keen eyes to be able to see a brand," observed Dakota, drawling; "especially when he's passed a whole lot of his time looking at brands."

"That's so," agreed Langford. "I suppose you have been a cowboy a long time."

"Longer than you've been a ranch owner."

Langford looked quickly at Dakota.

"Then you know me?" he said.

"No. I don't know you. I've put two and two together. I heard that Duncan was selling the Double R. I've seen your daughter. And you ride up here on a Double R horse. There ain't no other strangers in the country. Then, of course, you're the new owner of the Double R."

Langford looked again at the inscrutable face of the man beside him and felt a sudden deep respect for him. Even if he had not witnessed the killing of Texas Blanca that day in Lazette he would have known the man before him for what he was—a quiet, cool, self-possessed man of much experience, who could not be trifled with.

"That's right," he admitted; "I am the new owner of the Double R. And I have come, my friend, to thank you for what you did for my daughter."

"She told you, then?" Dakota's gaze was again on Langford.

"Certainly."

"She's told you what?"

"How you rescued her from the quicksand."

"She tell you anything else?"

"Why, what else is there to tell?" There was sincere curiosity in Langford's voice, for Sheila had always told him everything that happened to her.

"Did she tell you that she forgot to thank me for saving her?" There was a queer smile on Dakota's lips.

"No, she neglected to relate that," returned Langford.

"Forgot it. That's what I thought. And so she's sent *you* over to thank me! Tell her no thanks are due."

"As it happens, she didn't send me. I came without her knowledge."

"To thank me—for her?"

"No."

"You're visiting then. Or maybe just riding around to look at your range. Sit down." He motioned to another box that stood near the door of the cabin.

Once Langford became seated Dakota again busied himself with the saddle, ignoring his visitor. Langford shifted uneasily on the box, for the seat was not to his liking and the attitude of his host was most peculiar. He fell silent also and kicked gravely and absently into a hummock with the toe of his boot.

After a long silence, Langford revived the conversation.

"It must be lonesome out here," he said.

"Not so lonesome."

"It's a big country, though — lots of land."

"That's right, there's plenty of it. I reckon the Lord wasn't in a stingy mood when he made it."

"Yet there seem to be restrictions even here."

"Restrictions?"

"Yes," laughed Langford; "restrictions on a man's desires."

DAKOTA looked at him with a saturnine smile. "Restrictions on a man's desires," he repeated slowly. "Some people wouldn't be satisfied if they owned the whole earth. They'd be wanting the sun, moon, and stars thrown in for good measure."

Langford laughed again. "That's human nature, my friend," he contended. "Have you got everything you want? Isn't there anything besides what you already have that appeals to you?"

"There are plenty of things I want. We all want a lot of things which we can't get."

"Correct, my friend. Some of us want money, others desire happiness. Some of us are never satisfied — the ambitious ones."

"Then you are ambitious?"

"You've struck it," smiled Langford.

Dakota caught his gaze. "What particular thing are *you* looking for?" he questioned.

"Land."

"Mine?" Dakota's lips curled a little. "Doubler's, then," he added as Langford shook his head with an emphatic, negative motion. "He's the only man who's got land near yours."

"That's correct," admitted Langford; "I want Doubler's land."

"You've got all the rest of those things then—happiness, money, and such?" said Dakota, in a low voice.

"Yes. I am pretty well off there."

"I reckon, if you've got all those things, that you ought to be satisfied. But of course you ain't, or you wouldn't want Doubler's land. Did you offer to buy it?"

"I asked him to name his own figure, and he wouldn't sell—wouldn't even consider selling."

"That's odd, isn't it? You'd naturally think that money could buy everything." He stopped a moment, and busied himself with the saddle. Presently he looked up again. "What are you figuring to do about Doubler?" he asked.

Langford glanced at Dakota with an oily, significant smile. "I am new to the country, my friend," he said. "I don't know anything about the usual custom employed to force a man to give up his land. Could you suggest anything?"

Dakota deliberately took up a wax-end, rolled it, and squinted his eyes as he forced the end of the thread through the eye of the needle which he held in the other hand. So far as Langford could see he exhibited no emotion whatever; his face was inscrutable; he might not have heard.

Yet Langford knew that he had heard; was certain that he grasped the full meaning of the question. But when the answer did come it was not the one that Langford expected. Dakota's eyes met his in a level gaze.

"Why don't you shoot him yourself?" he said, drawling his words a little.

"Not taking any chances?—Your business principles don't take you quite that far, eh? And so you've come over to get

me to shoot him?" He laughed coldly. "What makes you think that you could hire me to put Doubler out of business?"

"I saw you shoot Blanca," said Langford. "And I sounded Duncan."

"You saw me shoot Blanca," said Dakota with a strange smile, "and Duncan told you I was the man to put Doubler away. Those are my recommendations." His voice was slightly ironical. "Did Duncan mention that he was a friend of mine?" he asked. "No? Just merely mentioned that I was uncommonly clever in the art of getting people—undesirable people—out of the way. Don't get the idea, though, because Duncan told you, that I make a business of shooting folks. I put Blanca out of the way because it was a question of him or me—I shot him to save my own hide. Shooting Doubler would be quite another proposition. Still—" He looked at Langford, his eyes narrowing and smoldering with a mysterious fire.

It seemed that he was inviting Langford to make a proposal, and the latter smiled evilly. "Still," he said, repeating Dakota's word with a significant inflection, "you don't refuse to listen to me. It would be worth a thousand dollars to me to have Doubler out of the way," he added.

It was out now, and Langford sat silent while Dakota gazed into the distance. Langford watched Dakota closely, but there was an absolute lack of expression in the latter's face.

"How are you offering to pay the thousand?" questioned Dakota. "And when?"

"In cash, when Doubler isn't here any more."

"That *sounds* all right," Dakota said. "I reckon you'll put it in writing?"

Langford's eyes narrowed; he smiled craftily. "I have never been accused of being a fool by any of the men with whom I have done business."

"I reckon we don't make any deal," laughed Dakota shortly.

"We'll arrange it this way," suggested Langford. "Doubler is not the only man I want to get rid of. I want your land, too. But"—he added as he saw Dakota's lips harden—"I don't propose to proceed against you in the manner I am dealing with Doubler. I flatter myself that I know men quite well. I'd like to buy your land. What would be a fair price for it?"

"Five thousand."

"We'll put it this way, then," said Langford briskly and silkily. "I will give you an agreement worded in this manner: 'One month after date I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars, in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union county.'" He looked at Dakota with a significant smile. "You see," he said, "that I am not particularly desirous of being instrumental in causing Doubler's death—you have misjudged me."

Dakota smiled. "I reckon you'll be an angel—give you time," he said. "I am accepting that proposition, though," he added. "I've been wanting to leave here—I've got tired of it. And"—he continued with a mysterious smile—"if things turn out as I expect, you'll be glad to have me go." He rose from the bench. "Let's write that agreement," he suggested.

They entered the cabin, and a few minutes later Dakota sat again on the box in the lee of the cabin wall, mending his saddle, the signed agreement in his pocket. Smiling, Langford rode the river trail, satisfied with the result of his visit. Turning once, Langford looked back. Dakota was still busy with his saddle. Langford urged his pony down the slope of the rise and vanished from view. Then Dakota ceased working on the saddle, drew out the signed agreement and read it through many times.

"That man," he said finally, looking toward the crest of the slope where Langford had disappeared, "thinks he has convinced me that I ought to kill my best friend. He hasn't changed a bit—not a damned bit!"

CHAPTER IX

Duncan Adds Two and Two

HAD Langford known that there had been a witness to his visit to Dakota he might not have ridden away from the latter's cabin so entirely satisfied with the result of his interview.

Duncan had been much interested in Langford's differences with Doubler. He had expected to be allowed to plan the details of the scheme which would have as its object the downfall of the nester, for thus he hoped to satisfy his personal vengeance against the latter.

But since the interview with Doubler at Doubler's cabin, Langford had been strangely silent regarding his plans.

It was annoying, to say the least. Dun-

can had waited patiently until the morning following his conversation with Langford about Dakota, certain that the Double R owner would speak, but when after breakfast the next morning Langford had ridden away without breaking his silence, the manager had gone into the ranch house, got his field glasses, mounted his pony, and followed.

When Langford was sitting on the box in front of Dakota's cabin, the manager was deep in the woods that surrounded the clearing where the cabin stood, watching intently through his field glasses.

He saw Langford depart, remained after his departure to see Dakota repeatedly read the signed agreement. Of course, he was entirely ignorant of what had transpired, but there was little doubt in his mind that the two had reached some sort of an understanding. That their conversation and subsequent agreement concerned Doubler he had little doubt.

Duncan did not return to the ranch house that day and spent the night at one of the line camps. The following day he rode in to the ranch house to find that Langford had gone out riding with Sheila. Morose, sullen, Duncan again rode abroad, returning with the dusk. In his conversation with Langford that night the Double R owner made no reference to Doubler, and, studying Sheila, Duncan thought she seemed depressed.

During her ride that day with her father Sheila had received a startling revelation of his character. She had questioned him regarding his treatment of Doubler, ending with a plea for justice for the latter.

"My dear Sheila," he said, "I should regret to find that you are interested in my business affairs."

"Doubler declares that you are unjust," she persisted.

"Doubler is an obstacle in the path of progress and will get the consideration he deserves," he said shortly. "Please do not meddle with what does not concern you."

A FEW days passed. Sheila was becoming bored. She no longer rode with her father. Her new insight into his character made him undesirable company in her eyes. A recollection of Duncan's jealousy, which he had exhibited on the day that she had related the story of her rescue by Dakota, still abided with her, and convinced that she might secure diversion by fanning the spark that she had discovered, she induced Duncan to ask her to ride with him.

SITTING on the grass one day in the shade of some fir-balsams on a slope several miles down the river, Sheila looked at Duncan with a smile.

"I believe that I am beginning to like the country," she said.

"I expected you would like it after you were here a while. The West improves on acquaintance, like the people."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you ought to begin to like us—the people," he said.

"Perhaps I do like some of the people," she laughed.

"For instance," he said.

She looked at him with a taunting smile. "I don't believe that I like you—so very well. You get too cross when things don't suit you."

"I think you are mistaken," he challenged. "When have I been cross?"

Sheila laughed. "Do you remember the night that I came home and told you and father how Dakota had rescued me from the quicksand? Well," she continued, noting his nod and the frown which accompanied it, "you were cross that night—almost boorish. You moped and went off to bed without saying good-night."

"We'll let it pass," said Duncan. "You don't like me. Who do you like?"

"Well," she said. "There's Ben Doubler. He seems to be a very nice old man. And" —Duncan looked at her and she met his gaze fairly, her eyes dancing with mischief —"and Dakota. He is a character, an odd one, but attractive, don't you think?"

Duncan sneered. "He pulled you out of the quicksand, of course. Anybody could have done that, if they'd been around. I reckon that's what makes him 'attractive' in your eyes. On the other hand, he put Texas Blanca out of business. Does that killing help to make him attractive?"

"He gave Blanca the opportunity to shoot first. Didn't he?"

It seemed odd to her that she was defending the man who had wronged her, yet strangely enough she discovered that defending him gave her a thrill of satisfaction, though she assured herself that the satisfaction came from the fact that she was engaged in the task of arousing Duncan's jealousy.

"He gave him an even break," Duncan admitted reluctantly. "But why are you defending him? You seem to have changed your attitude toward him. Have you seen him lately?"

"No." Sheila was flecking some dust from her skirts with her riding whip, and her manner was one of absolute lack of interest.

"Then you ain't been riding with your father?" said Duncan.

"Some." Sheila continued to brush the dust from her skirts. After answering Duncan's question, however, she realized that there had been a subtle undercurrent of meaning in his voice.

"Why?" she demanded. "Do you mean that father has visited Dakota?"

"I reckon I'm meaning just that."

"Father attends to his own business," she said. "What he does in a business way does not interest me."

"No?" said Duncan mockingly. "Well, he's made some sort of a deal with Dakota!" he snapped, aware of his lack of wisdom in telling her this, but unable to control his resentment over the slight which had been imposed on him by Langford, and by her own chilling manner, which seemed to emphasize the fact that he had been left outside their intimate councils.

"A deal?" said Sheila quickly, unable to control her interest.

For a moment he did not answer. Under the sudden necessity of proving his statements, his thoughts centered upon the conclusion which had resulted from his suspicions—that Langford's visit to Dakota concerned Doubler.

"The other day your father was speaking to me about gun-men. I told him that Dakota would do anything for money."

SHEILA turned suddenly to him. "How do you know that Dakota would do anything like that?"

"How do I know?" he jeered. "How does a man know anything in this country? By using his eyes, of course. I've watched Dakota for five years. I've known all along that he isn't on the square—that he has been running his branding iron on other folk's cattle. I've told you that he worked a crooked deal on me, and then sent Blanca over the divide when he thought there was a chance of Blanca giving the deal away.

"The other day I saw your father at his cabin, talking to him. They had quite a confab. Your father has had trouble with Doubler—you know that. He has threatened to run Doubler off the Two Forks. I heard that myself. He wouldn't try to run Doubler off himself—that's too dangerous a business for him to undertake. Not wanting to take the chance himself he hires someone else. Who? Dakota's the only gun-man around these parts. Therefore, your dad goes to Dakota. He and Dakota signed a paper—I saw Dakota reading it. I've just put two and two together, and that's the result. I reckon I ain't far out of the way."

"I believe you are lying," she said coldly. "You don't like Dakota. But I have faith in him—in his manhood. I don't believe that he would, or could, be so entirely base as to plan to murder a poor, unoffending old man in cold blood. Perhaps you are not lying," she concluded with straight lips, "but the very least that can be said for you is that you have a lurid imagination!"

Duncan smiled evilly. "Wait," he said. "You'll know more about Dakota before long."

Sheila rose and walked to her pony, mounting the animal and riding slowly away from the river. She did not see the queer smile on Duncan's face as she rode, but looking back at the distance of a hundred yards, she saw that he did not intend to follow her. He was still sitting where she had left him, his back to her, his face turned toward the plains which spread away toward Dakota's cabin, twenty miles down the river.

CHAPTER X

A Parting and a Visit

DURING the next few days Duncan did not see much of Sheila, for he avoided the ranch house as much as possible. He rode out with Langford many times, and though he covertly questioned the Double R owner concerning the affair with Doubler he could gain no satisfying information. Finally one afternoon when they rode up to the ranch house his curiosity could be held in check no longer, and he put the blunt question:

"What have you done about Doubler?"

Langford's shifting eyes rested for the fraction of a second on the face of his manager, and then he answered, "Nothing."

"I have been thinking," said Duncan carelessly, "that it wouldn't be a half bad idea to set a gun-man on Doubler—a man like Dakota, for instance."

The manager saw Langford's lips straighten a little, and his eyes flashed with a sudden fire. The expression on Langford's face strengthened the conviction already in Duncan's mind concerning the motive of his employer's visit to Dakota.

"I don't think I care to have any dealings with Dakota," said Langford shortly.

"I reckon if you'd go talk to him," Duncan persisted, "you might be able to make a deal with him."

"I don't wish to deal with him. I have decided not to bother Doubler at present. And I have no desire to talk with Dakota."

Duncan did not reply, and he said nothing more to Langford on the subject, but he had discovered that for some reason Langford had chosen to keep the knowledge of his visit to Dakota secret, and Duncan's suspicions that the visit concerned Doubler became a conviction. Filled with resentment over Langford's attitude toward him, and with his mind definitely fixed upon the working out of his problem, Duncan decided to visit Doubler.

He chose a day when Langford had ridden away to a distant cow camp. Within sight of Doubler's cabin he halted to reconnoiter. A swift survey of the corral showed him a rangy, piebald pony, which he knew to belong to Dakota. As the animal had on a bridle and a saddle he surmised that Dakota's visit would not be of long duration, and having no desire to visit Doubler in the presence of his rival, hid himself and his horse in a grove of cottonwood.

For an hour, deep in the grove, he watched the cabin, and at length he saw Dakota come out.

Dakota departed down the river trail, Duncan slowly rode out of the grove and approached the cabin.

Doubler stood in the open doorway, looking after Dakota, and when the latter finally disappeared around a bend in the river the nester turned and saw Duncan. Instantly he stepped inside the cabin door, reappearing immediately, holding a rifle. Duncan continued to ride forward, raising one hand, with the palm toward Doubler, as a sign of the peacefulness of his intentions. The latter permitted him to approach, though he held the rifle belligerently.

"I want to talk," said Duncan, when he had come near enough to make himself heard.

"Pull up right where you are, then," commanded Doubler. His voice came with a truculent snap:

"You alone?"

Duncan nodded.

"Where's your new boss?" sarcastically inquired Doubler. "Ain't you scared he'll git lost—runnin' around alone without anyone to look after him?"

"I ain't his keeper. We've had a falling out." The venom in Duncan's voice was not all pretended. "He's double crossed me."

"Double crossed you?" There was disbelief and suspicion in Doubler's laugh. "How's he done that? I reckoned you was too smart for anyone to do that to you?"

"That's all right," Duncan said; "I've got more than that coming from you. I'm telling you about what he done to me if you ain't got any objections to me getting off my horse."

"Tell me from where you are. Mebbe you an' him have had a fallin' out, but I ain't takin' any chances on you bein' my friend—not a durned chance."

"That's right. I don't blame you for not wanting to take a chance, and I'm not pretending to be your friend. And I sure ain't any friendly to Langford. He's double crossed me, but I ain't telling how he done it—that's between him and me. But I want to tell you something that will interest you a whole lot. It's about some guy which is trying to double cross you. To prove that I ain't thinking to plug you when you ain't looking I'm leaving my gun here." He drew out his six-shooter and stuck it behind his slicker, dismounted, and threw the reins over the pony's head.

In silence Doubler suffered him to approach, though he kept his rifle ready in his hand.

"You and me ain't been what you might call friendly for a long time," offered Duncan when he had halted a few feet from Doubler. "We've had words, but I've never tried to take any mean advantage of you — which I might have done if I'd wanted to."

"We ain't goin' to go over what's happened between us," declared Doubler coldly. "We're lettin' that go by. If you'll stick to the palaver that you spoke about mebbe we'll be able to git along for a min-

ute or two. Meanwhile, you'll excuse me if I keep this here gun in shape for you if you try any monkey business."

Duncan masked his dislike of Doubler under a deprecatory smile. "That's right," he agreed. "We'll let what's happened pass without talking about it. What's between us now is something different. I've never pretended to be your friend, and I'm not pretending to be your friend now. But I've always been square with you, and I'm square now. Can you say that about him?" He jerked his thumb in the direction of the river trail, on which Dakota had vanished some time before.

"Him?" inquired Doubler. "You mean Dakota?" He caught Duncan's nod and smiled slowly. "I reckon you're some off your range," he said. "There ain't no comparin' Dakota to you — he's always been my friend."

"A man's got a friend one day and he's an enemy the next," said Duncan mysteriously.

"Meanin'?"

"Meaning that Dakota ain't so much of a friend as you think he is."

DOUBLER'S lips grew straight and hard.

"I reckon that ends the palaver," he said coldly, while he fingered the rifle in his hand significantly. "If that's what you come for you can be hittin' the breeze right back to the Double R. I'm givin' you—"

"You're traveling too fast," remonstrated Duncan. "You'll talk different when you hear what I've got to say. I reckon you know that Langford ain't any friendly to you?"

"I don't see—" began Doubler.

He was interrupted by Duncan's harsh laugh. " Of course you don't see," he said, "I've come over here to make you open your eyes. Langford ain't no friend of yours, and I reckon that you wouldn't consider any man your friend which sets in his cabin a couple of hours talking to Langford, about you?"

"Meanin' that Langford's been to see Dakota?" Doubler's voice grew harsh.

"When a man's been a friend to you and you find that he's going to double cross you, it's apt to make you feel pretty mean," Duncan said. "I'm allowing that. But there's a lot of us get double crossed. I got it and I'm seeing that they don't ring in any cold deck on you."

"How do you know Dakota's tryin' to do that?" demanded Doubler.

Duncan laughed. "I've kept my eyes open. Also, I've been listening right hard. I wasn't so far away when Langford went to Dakota's shack, and I heard considerable of what they said about you."

Doubler's interest was now intense; he spoke eagerly: "What did they say?"

"I reckon you ought to be able to guess what they said," said Duncan with a crafty smile. "I reckon you know that Langford wants your land mighty bad, don't you? And you won't sell. Didn't he tell you in front of me that he was going to make trouble for you? He saw Dakota send Blanca over the divide and he's some impressed by his shooting. He figures that if Dakota puts one man out of business he'll put another out."

"Meanin' that Langford's hired Dakota to look for me?"

"You're some keen, after all," taunted Duncan.

Doubler's jaws snapped. "You're a liar!" he said; "Dakota wouldn't do it!"

"Maybe I'm a liar," repeated Duncan. "But if you'll use your brain a little you'll see that things look bad for you. Dakota's been here. Did he tell you about Langford coming to see him? I reckon not," he added as he caught Doubler's blank stare; "he'd likely not tell you about it. But I reckon that if he was your friend he'd tell you. I reckon you told him about Langford wanting your land—about him telling you he'd make things hot for you?"

Doubler nodded silently, and Duncan continued. "Well," he said, with a short laugh, "I've told you, and it's up to you. And they didn't only talk. Langford wrote something on a paper and gave it to Dakota. I don't know what he wrote, but it seemed to tickle Dakota a heap. Likely Langford's promised him a heap of dust to do the job. Mebbe he's your friend, but if I was you I wouldn't give him no chance to say I drawed first."

DOUBLER placed his rifle down and passed a hand slowly and hesitatingly over his forehead. "I don't like to think that of Dakota," he said, faith and suspicion battling for supremacy. "Dakota just left here; he acted a heap friendly—as usual—mebbe more so."

"I reckon that when a man goes gunning for another man he don't advertise a

whole lot," observed Duncan insinuatingly.

"No," agreed Doubler, "a man don't generally do a heap of advertisin' when he's out lookin' for a man." He sat for a time staring straight ahead, and then he suddenly looked up, his eyes filled with a savage fierceness. "How do I know you ain't lyin' to me?" he demanded, glaring at Duncan, his hands clenched in an effort to control himself.

"I reckon you *don't* know whether I'm lying," Duncan returned. "But I reckon you're twenty-one and ought to have your eye-teeth cut. Anyway, you ought to know that a man like Langford, who's wanting your land, don't go to talk with a man like Dakota, who's some on the shoot, for nothing. How do you know that Langford and Dakota ain't friends? How do you know but that they've been friends back East? Do you know where Dakota came from? I'm telling you one thing," added Duncan, and now his voice was filled with passion, "Dakota and Sheila Langford are pretty thick. She makes believe that she don't like him, but he saved her from a quicksand, and she's been running with him considerable. Takes his part, too; does it, but she makes you believe that she don't like him. I reckon she's pretty foxy.

"I reckon you know a heap about Dakota, don't you?" Duncan continued. "You know, for instance, that Dakota came here from Dakota—or anyway, he says he came here from there. We'll say you know that. But what do you know about Langford? Didn't he tell you that he was going to 'get' you?"

Duncan turned his back to Doubler and walked to his pony. He drew out his six-shooter, stuck it into its holster, and placed one foot in a stirrup, preparatory to mounting. Then he turned and spoke gravely to Doubler.

"I've done all I could," he said. "You know how you stand and the rest of it is up to you. You can go on, letting Dakota and Sheila pretend to be friendly to you, and some day you'll get wise awful sudden —when it's too late. Or, you can wise up now and fix Dakota before he gets a chance at you. I reckon that's all. You can't say that I didn't put you wise to the game."

He swung into the saddle and urged the pony toward the crossing. Looking back from a crest of a rise on the other side of the river, he saw Doubler still standing in the doorway, his head bowed in his hands. Duncan smiled, for he had planted the seed of suspicion and was satisfied that it would presently flourish and grow until it would finally accomplish the destruction of his rival, Dakota.

CHAPTER XI

A Meeting on the River Trail

ABOUT ten o'clock in the morning of a perfect day Sheila left the Double R ranch house for a ride to the Two Forks to visit Doubler.

She had reached a point about a mile from Doubler's cabin when an odd sound broke the perfect quiet.

Suddenly alert, she halted her pony and listened.

The sound had been strangely like a pistol shot, though louder, she decided, as she listened to its echo reverberating in the adjacent hills. She sat for a long time motionless in the saddle, listening, but no other sound disturbed the solemn quiet that surrounded her.

It seemed to her that the sound had come from the direction of Doubler's cabin, but she was not quite certain, knowing how difficult it was to determine the direction of sound in so vast a stretch of country.

She ceased to speculate, and once more urged her pony forward.

Fifteen minutes later, still holding the river trail, she saw a horseman approaching, and long before he came near enough for her to distinguish his features she knew the rider for Dakota. When he saw her he doffed his broad hat, and smiled gravely at her.

"Were you shooting?" she questioned, aware that this was an odd greeting, but eager to have the mystery of that lone shot cleared up.

"I reckon I ain't been shooting—lately," he returned. "It must have been Doubler. I heard it myself. I've just left Doubler, and he was cleaning his rifle. He must have been trying it." He narrowed his eyes whimsically at her. "So you're riding the river trail again?" he said. "I thought you'd be doing it."

"Why?" she questioned, defiantly.

"Well, for one thing, there's a certain fascination about a place where one has other reason why I expected to see you on the river trail again. You forgot to been close to cashing in. And there's an- thank me for pulling you out. That's no

way to act towards your—" He hesitated and smiled oddly, apparently aware that he had made a mistake in referring to his crime against her. He hastened to repair it. "Your rescuer," he corrected.

However, she saw through the artifice. "It is needless for you to remind me of our relationship," she said; "I am not likely to forget."

"Have you told your father yet?"

"No, I haven't told him," she said. "I don't intend to. I told you that before. And if you do not already know it, I want to tell you that David Langford is not my father; my real father died a long time ago, and Langford is only my stepfather."

A sudden moisture was in her eyes and she did not see Dakota start, did not observe the queer pallor that spread over his face, failed to detect the odd light in his eyes. However, she heard his voice—sharp in tone and filled with genuine astonishment.

"Your stepfather?" He had spurred his pony beside hers, and looking up she saw that his face had suddenly grown stern and grim. "Do you mean that?" he demanded half angrily. "Why didn't you tell me that before? Why didn't you tell me when —the night I married you?"

"Would it have made any difference to you?" she said bitterly. "Does it make any difference now? You have treated me like a savage; you are treating me like one now. I—I haven't any friends at all," she continued, her voice breaking slightly, as she suddenly realized her entire helplessness before the combined evilness of Duncan, her father, and the man who sat on his pony beside her. A sob shook her, and her hands went to her face, covering her eyes.

SHE sat there for a time, shuddering, and watching her closely, Dakota's face grew slowly pale, and grim.

"I know what Duncan's friendship amounts to," he said harshly. "But isn't your stepfather your friend?"

"My friend?" She echoed his words with a hopeless intonation. "I don't know what has come over him," she continued, looking up at Dakota, "he has changed since he came out here; he is so selfish and heartless."

"What's he been doing? Hurting you?" She did not detect the anger in his voice, for he had kept it so low that she scarcely heard the words.

"Hurting me? No; he has not done anything to me. Don't you know?" she said scornfully, for how could his interest be genuine when he was a party to the plot to murder Doubler? Yet perhaps not—maybe Duncan *had* been lying. Determined to get to the bottom of the affair as quickly as possible, Sheila continued rapidly. "Don't you know?" And this time her voice was almost a plea. "What did father visit you for? Wasn't it about Doubler? Didn't he hire you to—to kill him?"

She saw his lips tighten strangely, his face grow pale, and she knew in an instant that he was guilty—guilty as her father!

"Oh!" she said. "Then it is true! You and my father have conspired to murder an inoffensive old man! You—you cowards!"

"Who has been telling you this?" The question came slowly, without the slightest trace of excitement.

"Duncan told me."

"Duncan?" There was contempt in his voice. "Not your father?"

She shook her head negatively.

He laughed mirthlessly. "So that's the reason Doubler was so friendly to his rifle this morning?" he said, as though her words had explained a mystery which had been puzzling him. "Doubler and me have been friends for a long time. But this morning while I was talking to him he kept his rifle beside him all the time. He must have heard from someone that I was gunning for him."

"Then you haven't been hired to kill him?"

"Miss Sheila," he said, "there isn't money enough in ten counties like this to make me kill Doubler. You are like a lot of other people in this country," he added. "Because I put Blanca away they think I am a professional gun-man. But I want *you*"—he placed a significant emphasis on the word—"to understand that there wasn't any other way to deal with Blanca. He forced me to take the step I did with him. Even then, I gave him his chance. That he didn't take it isn't my fault.

"I suppose I look pretty black to you, because I treated you like I did. But it was partly your fault, too. Maybe that's mysterious to you, but it will have to stay a mystery. I had an idea in my head that night—and something else. I've found something out since that makes me feel a lot sorry. If I had known what I know now, that wouldn't have happened to you."

Their ponies were very close together, and leaning over suddenly he placed both hands on her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. She did not try to escape his hands, for she felt that his sincerity warranted the action.

"I've treated you mean, Sheila," he said; "about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you'll understand and forgive me."

"This business?" Sheila drew back and looked at him wonderingly. "What do you mean?"

He dropped his hands to his sides. "This Doubler business," he answered.

"That's evasion," she said, looking straight at him, hoping that he would speak the truth.

"Sorry, that's the only answer. I am not going to kill Doubler—if it will do you any good to know. I don't kill my friends."

"Then," she said eagerly, catching at the hope which he held out to her, "father didn't hire you to kill him?"

"Why don't you ask your father about that?"

The hope died within her. Dakota's words and manner implied that her father had tried to employ him to kill the nester, but that he had refused. Duncan had not been wrong in his suspicion that her father was planning the death of the nester. Duncan's only mistake was in including Dakota in the scheme.

She had hoped against hope that she might discover that Duncan had been wrong altogether; that she had done her father an injury in believing him capable of deliberately planning a murder. She looked again at Dakota. There was no mistaking his earnestness.

She put her hands to her face and shivered, now thoroughly convinced of her father's guilt; feeling a sudden repugnance for him, for everybody and everything in the country, excepting Doubler.

She had done all she could to prevent them killing Doubler—all she could do except to warn Doubler of his danger, and she would go to him immediately. Without looking again at Dakota she turned, dry eyed and pale, urging her pony up the trail toward the nester's cabin, leaving Dakota sitting silent in his saddle, watching her.

She presently reached the Two Forks and urged her pony through the shallow water of its crossing, riding up the slight, intervening slope and upon a stretch of plain beside a timber grove. A little later she came to the corral gates, where she dismounted and hitched her pony to a rail, smiling to herself as she thought of how surprised Doubler would be when he had seen her.

Then she left the corral gate and stole softly around a corner of the cabin, determined to steal upon Doubler unawares. Once at the corner, she halted and peered around. She saw Doubler lying in the open doorway, his body twisted into a peculiarly odd position, face down, his arms outstretched, his legs doubled under him.

CHAPTER XII

The Shot in the Back

FOR an instant after discovering Doubler lying in the doorway, Sheila stood motionless at the corner of the cabin, looking down wonderingly at him. She thought at first that he was merely resting, but his body was doubled up so oddly that a grave doubt rose in her mind. A vague fear clutched at her heart, and she stood rigid, her eyes wide as she looked for some sign that would confirm her fears. And then she saw a moist red patch on his shirt on the right side just below the shoulder blade. Something had happened to Doubler!

She saw it all in a flash. Dakota had been to visit Doubler and had shot him. She had heard the shot. Duncan had been right, and Dakota—how she despised him now!—was probably even now picturing in his imagination the scene of her discovering the nester lying on his own threshold, murdered.

She bent down and touched him lightly with the tips of her fingers, calling softly to him. Getting no response, she took hold of him by the left shoulder and shook him slightly, and her heart seemed to leap within her when a faint moan escaped his lips.

She took hold of him again, tugging and pulling at him, trying to turn him over so that she might see his face. She observed that the red patch on his shoulder grew larger with the effort, and her face grew paler with apprehension, but convinced that she must persist she shut her

eyes and tugged desperately at him, finally succeeding in pulling him over on his back.

He moaned again, though his face was ashen and lifeless, and with hope filling her heart she redoubled her efforts and finally succeeded in dragging him inside the cabin, out of the sun, where he lay inert, with wide-stretched arms, a gruesome figure to the girl.

She ought to have help, and her thoughts went to Dakota, riding unconcernedly away on the river trail. She could not go to him for assistance, such a course was not to be considered, she would rather let Doubler die than to go to his murderer.

She put aside the thought with a shudder of horror, yet conscious that something must be done for Doubler at once if he was to live. Perhaps it was already too late to go for assistance; there seemed to be but very little life in his body. There was not much that she could do, to be sure, but if she could do something she might keep him alive until other help would come.

She found a sheath knife, and with this she cut the shirt away from the wound, discovering, when she drew the pieces of cloth away, that there was a large, round hole in his breast. She thought of the red patch on his back, and that seemed to prove that the bullet had gone clear through him. It had missed a vital spot, though, she thought, for it seemed to be rather high on the shoulder.

She got some water from a pail that stood just inside the door, and with this and some white cloth which she tore from one of her skirts, she bathed and bandaged the wound and laid a wet cloth on his forehead.

After she had worked with him for a quarter of an hour or more she stood up, convinced that she had done all she could for him and the next move would be to get a doctor.

She had heard Duncan say that it was fifty miles to Dry Bottom, and she knew that it was at least forty to Lazette. She had never heard anyone mention that there was a doctor nearer, and so of course she would have to go to Lazette.

She drew a deep breath over the contemplation of the long ride—at best it would take her four hours—but she did not hesitate long and with a last glance at Doubler she was out of the door and walking to the corral, where she unhitched her pony, mounted, and set the animal over the level toward the crossing at a sharp gallop.

ONCE over the crossing and on the river trail where the riding was better, she held the pony to an even, steady pace. One mile, two miles, five or six she rode with her hair flying in the breeze, her cheeks pale, except for a bright red spot in the center of each—which betrayed the excitement under which she was laboring.

She reached and passed the quicksand crossing from which she had been pulled by Dakota, and was on a level which led into some hills directly ahead, when the pony stumbled.

She tried to jerk it erect with the reins, but in spite of the effort she felt it sink under her, and with a sensation of dismay clutching at her heart she slid out of the saddle.

A swift examination showed her that the pony's right foreleg was deep in the sand of the trail, and she surmised instantly that it had stepped into a prairie dog hole. She began looking about for some means to extricate it.

She found this no easy task, for the pony's leg was deep in the sand, and when she finally dug a space around it with a branch of tree which she procured from a nearby grove, the animal struggled out, only to limp badly. The leg, Sheila decided, after a quick examination, was not broken, but badly sprained, and she knew enough about horses to be certain that the injured pony would never be able to carry her to Lazette.

A clatter of hoofs aroused her from her despair, and she turned to see Dakota riding the trail toward her. He was traveling in the direction she had been traveling when the accident had happened, and apparently had left the trail somewhere back in the distance, or she would have seen him. Perhaps, she speculated, with a flash of dull anger, he had followed her near to Doubler's cabin, perhaps had been near when she had dragged the wounded nester into it.

He drew up beside her. "You didn't stay long at Doubler's shack," he said. "I was on a ridge, back on the trail a ways, and I saw you hitting the breeze away from there some rapid. I was thinking to intercept you, but you went tearing by so fast that I didn't get a chance.

You're in an awful hurry. What's wrong?"

"You ought to know that," she said bitterly. "You—you murderer!"

His face paled, but his voice was clear.

"Murderer?" he said sternly. "Who has been murdered?"

"You don't know, of course," she said scornfully, her face flaming. "You shot him and then let me ride on alone to—to find him, shot—shot in the back! Oh!"

She shuddered at the recollection, held her hands over her eyes for an instant to keep from looking at the expression of amazement in his eyes. She cringed and cried with pain as he seized her arm and twisted her forcibly around so that she faced him.

"Stop this fooling and tell me what has happened!" he said, with short, incisive accents. "Who did you find shot? Who has been murdered?"

Oh, it was admirable acting, she told herself as she tore herself away from him. "You don't know, of course," she flared. "You shot him—shot him in the back and sent me on to find him. But he isn't dead, thank God, and will live, if I can get a doctor, to accuse you!" She pointed a finger at him, but he ignored it and took a step toward her, his eyes cold and boring into hers.

"Who?" he demanded. "Who?"

"Ben Doubler. Oh!" she cried, in an excess of rage and horror, "to think that I should have to tell you!"

But if he heard her last words he paid no attention to them, for he was suddenly at his pony's side, buckling the cinches tighter.

"He isn't dead, then," he said rapidly, sharply. "You were going to Lazette for a doctor. I'm glad I happened along—glad I saw you. I'll be able to make better time than you."

"Where are you going?" she demanded, scarcely having heard his words, though aware that he was preparing to leave. She took a step forward and seized his pony's bridle rein, her eyes blazing with wrath over the thought that he should attempt to deceive her with so bald a ruse.

"For the doctor," he said shortly. "This is no time for melodramatics, ma'am, if Doubler is badly hurt. Will you please let go of that bridle?"

"Do you think," she demanded, "that I am going to let you go for the doctor? You!"

"This isn't a case where your feelings should be considered, ma'am," he said. "If Ben Doubler has been hurt I'm going to get the doctor mighty sudden, whether you think I ought to or not!"

"You won't!" she declared. "You shot him and now you want to disarm suspicion by going after the doctor for him. But you won't! I won't let you!"

"You'll have to," he said rapidly. "The doctor isn't at Lazette; he is over on Carrizo Creek, taking care of Dave Moreland's wife, who is down bad. You don't know where Moreland's place is. Be sensible, now," he said gruffly. "I'll talk to you later about you suspecting me."

"You shan't go," she protested; "I am going myself. I will find Moreland's place. I can't let you go—it would be horrible!"

FOR answer he swung quickly down from the saddle, seized her by the waist, disengaged her hands from the bridle rein, and picking her up bodily carried her, struggling and fighting and striking blindly at his face, to the side of the trail. When he set her down he pinned her arms to her sides. He did not speak, and she was entirely helpless in his grasp, but when he released his grasp of her arms and tried to leave her she seized the collar of his vest. With a grim laugh he slipped out of the garment, leaving it dangling from her hand.

"Keep it for me, ma'am," he said with a cold chuckle. "But get back to Doubler's cabin and see what you can do for him. You'll be able to do a lot. I'll be back with the doctor before sundown."

In an instant he was at his pony's side, mounting with the animal at a run, and in a brief space had vanished around a turn.

For a long time Sheila stood beside the trail, looking at the spot where he had disappeared, holding his vest with an unconscious grasp. Looking down she saw it and with an exclamation of rage threw it from her, watching it fall into the sand. But after an instant she went over and took it up, recovering, at the same time, a black leather pocket memoranda which had slipped out of it. She put the memoranda back into one of the pockets, handling both the book and the vest gingerly, for she felt an aversion to touching them. She conquered this feeling long enough to tuck the vest into the slicker behind the saddle, and then she mounted and sent her pony up the trail toward Doubler's cabin.

She found Doubler where she had left him, and he was still unconscious. The water pail was empty and she went down to the river and refilled it, returning to the cabin and again bathing and bandaging Doubler's wound, and placing a fresh cloth on his forehead.

For a time she sat watching the injured man, revolving the incident of her discovery of him in her mind. She did not dwell long on the latter, for she could not prevent her mind reviewing Dakota's words and actions, his prediction that she would understand when this "business" was over. She did not need to wait, she understood now!

Remembering Dakota's vest and the black leather memorandum book which had dropped from one of the pockets, she got up again and went to the bench where she had laid the garment, taking out the book and regarding it with some curiosity.

She hesitated, debating the propriety of an examination, but her curiosity got the better of her and with a sharp glance at Doubler she turned her back and opened the book.

Almost the first object that caught her gaze was a piece of paper, detached from the leaves, with some writing on it. The writing seemed unimportant, but as she turned it, intending to replace it between the leaves of the book, she saw her father's name, and she read, holding her breath with dread, for fresh in her mind was Duncan's charge that her father had entered into an agreement with Dakota for the murder of Doubler. She read the words several times, standing beside the bench and swaying back and forth, a sudden weakness gripping her.

The words read:

> "One month from today I promise to pay to Dakota the sum of six thousand dollars in consideration of his rights and interest in the Star brand, provided that within one month from date he persuades Ben Doubler to leave Union County.
>
> "Signed: DAVID DOWD LANGFORD."

There it was—conclusive, damning evidence of her father's guilt—and of Dakota's!

How cleverly that last clause covered the evil intent of the document! Sheila read it again and again with dry eyes. Her horror and grief were too great for tears.

How long she sat on the door step she did not know. When she finally got up and looked about her she saw that the sun had traveled quite a distance down the sky. It was going away, and before it could complete another circle she would go too—back to the East from where she had come, where there were at least *some* friends who could be depended upon to commit no atrocious crimes.

No plan of action formed in her mind; she could not think lucidly with the knowledge that her father was convicted of complicity in an attempted murder.

Would she be able to face her father again? To bid him good-bye? She thought not.

There was a fascination in the paper on which was written the signed agreement. She read it carefully again, and then concealed it in her bodice, pinning it there so that it would not become lost. Then she rose and went into the cabin, placing the memoranda on a shelf where Dakota would be sure to find it when he returned with the doctor. She did not care to read anything contained in it.

She went outside again and resumed her seat on the door step. There arose in her mind as she sat there, a wonder as to how her father would act were she to confront him with evidence of his guilt. Perhaps she would not show him the paper, but she finally became convinced that she must talk to him, must learn from him in some manner his connection with the attempted murder of Doubler. Then, after receiving from him some sign which would convince her, she would take her belongings and depart for the East.

Looking up at the sun, she saw that it still had quite a distance to travel before it reached the mountains. Stealing into the cabin, she once more fixed the bandages on the wounded man. Then she went out, mounted her pony, and rode through the shallow water of the crossing toward the Double R ranch.

CHAPTER XIII

LANGFORD LAYS OFF THE MASK

THE sun was still an hour above the horizon when Sheila rode up to the corral gates.

She went into the house to find that Langford was not there. Duncan's sister informed her that she had seen him a few minutes before dawn at the stables. Sheila went into the office, and seating herself at

her father's desk picked up a six months' old copy of a magazine and tried to read.

Finding that she could not concentrate her thoughts, she dropped the magazine into her lap and leaned back with a sigh. From where she sat she had a good view of the stables, and fifteen minutes later, while she still watched, she saw Langford come out of one of the stable doors and walk toward the house. For a moment she lost sight of him behind some buildings, and then he opened the door of the office and entered.

He stopped on the threshold for an instant and looked at her, evidently expecting her to offer her usual greeting. He frowned slightly when it did not come, and then smiled.

"Hello!" he said cordially. "You are back, I see. And tired," he added, noting her position. He walked over and laid a hand on her forehead and she involuntarily shrank from his touch, shuddering, for the hand which he had placed on her forehead was the right one—the hand with which he had signed the agreement with Dakota—Doubler's death warrant.

"Don't please," she said.

"Cross, too?" he said jocularly.

"Just tired," she lied listlessly, and with an air of great indifference.

He looked critically at her for an instant, then smiled again and dragged a chair over near a window and looked out, apparently little concerned over her manner.

"Ride far?" he questioned, turning and facing her, his voice casual.

"Not very far."

"The river trail?"

Sheila nodded, and saw a sudden interest flash into his eyes.

"Which way?" he asked quickly.

"Down," she returned. She had not lied, for she *had* ridden "down," and though she had also ridden up the river she preferred to let him guess a little.

He had not been interested in her for a long time, had not appeared to care where she spent her time. Why should he betray interest now? She saw a mysterious smile on his face and knew before he spoke that his apparent interest in her was not genuine—that he was merely curious.

"Then you haven't heard the news?" he said softly.

"What news?" she questioned, without looking at him.

"About Doubler," he said. "He is dead."

Her surprise was genuine. Had the nester died since she had left his cabin! A moment's thought convinced her that this could not be the explanation, for assuredly she would have seen anyone who had arrived at Doubler's cabin; she had scanned the surrounding country before and after leaving the vicinity of the crossing and had seen no signs of anyone. Besides, Langford's news seemed to have abided with him a long time—it seemed to her that he had known it for hours. She could not tell why she felt this, but she was certain that he had not received word recently—within an hour or two at any rate—unless he had seen Dakota.

This seemed to be the secret of his knowledge, and the more she considered the latter's excitement during her meeting with him on the trail, the more fully she became convinced that Langford had talked to him. The latter's anxiety to relieve her of the task of riding to Lazette for the doctor had been spurious; he had merely wanted to be the first to carry the news of Doubler's death to Langford, and after leaving her he had undoubtedly taken a roundabout trail for the Double R. Possibly by this time he had settled with Langford and was on his way out of the country.

"Dead?" she said, turning to Langford. "Who—" In her momentary excitement she had come very near to asking him who had brought him the news. She hesitated, for she saw a glint of surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

"My dear girl, did I say that he had been 'killed'?"

Evidently he had expected that she had been about to ask who had killed the nester.

HE looked at her steadily, an intolerant smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "I am aware that you have been suspicious of me ever since you heard that I had a quarrel with Doubler. But, thank God, my dear, I have not that crime to answer for. Doubler, however, has been killed—murdered."

Sheila repressed a desire to shudder, and turned from Langford so that he would not be able to see the disgust that had come into her eyes over the discovery that in addition to being a murderer her father was that most despicable of all living things—

a hypocrite! It required all of her composure to be able to look at him again.

"Who killed him?" she asked evenly.

"Dakota, my dear."

"Dakota! How do you know that Dakota killed him?" she said, looking straight at him.

"Duncan was fortunate enough to be in the vicinity when the deed was committed," he told her. "And he saw Dakota shoot him in the back. With his own rifle, too."

There was a quality in his voice which hinted at satisfaction; a peculiar emphasis on the word "fortunate" which caused Sheila to wonder why he should consider it fortunate that Duncan had seen the murder done, when it would have been much better for the success of Dakota's and her father's scheme if there had been no witness to it at all.

"However," continued Langford, "Doubler's death will not be a very great loss to the country. Duncan tells me that he has long been suspected of cattle stealing, and sooner or later he would have been caught in the act. And as for Dakota," he laughed harshly, with a note of suppressed triumph that filled her with an unaccountable resentment; "Dakota is an evil in the country, too. Do you remember how he killed that Mexican half-breed over in Lazette that day?—the day I came? Wanton murder, I call it. Such a man is a danger and a menace, and I shall not be sorry to see him hanged for killing Doubler."

"Then you will have Duncan charge Dakota with the murder?"

"Of course, my dear; why shouldn't I? Assuredly you would not allow Dakota to go unpunished?"

"No," said Sheila, "Doubler's murderer should be punished."

Two things were now fixed in her mind as certainties. Dakota had not been to see her father since she had left him on the river trail; he had not received his blood-money—would never receive it. Her father had no intention of living up to his agreement with Dakota and intended to allow him to be hanged.

"Dakota will be hung, of course; decency demands it," Langford continued. "When Duncan came to me with the news I sent him instantly to Lazette to inform the sheriff of what had happened. Undoubtedly he will take Dakota into custody at once."

"But not for murder," said Sheila evenly, unable to keep a quiver of triumph out of her voice.

"Not?" said Langford startled. "Why not?"

"Because," returned Sheila, enjoying the sudden consternation that was revealed in her father's face, and drawling her words a little to further confound him; "because Doubler isn't dead."

"Not dead!" Langford's jaws sagged, and he sat looking at Sheila with wide staring, vacuous eyes. "Not dead?" he repeated hoarsely. "Why, Duncan told me he had examined him, that he had been shot through the lungs and had bled to death before he left him! How do you know that he is not dead?" he suddenly demanded, leaning toward her, a wild hope in his eyes.

"I went to his cabin before noon," said Sheila. "I found him lying in the doorway. He had been shot through the right side, near the shoulder, but not through the lung, and he was still alive. I dragged him into the cabin and did what I could for him. Then I started for the doctor."

"For the doctor?" he said incredulously. "Then how does it happen that you are here? You couldn't possibly ride to Lazette and return by this time!"

"I believe I said that I 'started' for the doctor," said Sheila. "I met Dakota on the trail, and he went."

Langford continued to stare at her; it seemed that he could not realize the truth. Then suddenly he was out of his chair and standing over her, his face bloated poisonously, his eyes ablaze with a malignant light.

"Damn you!" he shrieked. "This is what comes of your infernal meddling! What business had you to interfere? Why didn't you let him die? I've a notion—"

His hands clenched and unclenched before her eyes, and she sat with blanched face, certain that he was about to attack her—perhaps kill her.

After a moment, however, he regained control of himself, leaving her side and pacing rapidly back and forth in the office, cursing bitterly.

Curiously, Sheila was not surprised at this outburst; she had rather expected it.

LANGFORD was standing over her again, his breath coming short and fast.

"Where did you see Dakota?" he ques-

tioned hoarsely. "Answer!" he added, when she did not speak immediately.

"On the river trail."

"Before you found Doubler?"

"Before, yes—and after. I met him twice."

"Before you found Doubler!" Langford's voice came with a vicious snap. "You met him coming from Doubler's cabin, I suppose?"

"Yes," she answered, "I met him coming from there. I was on the trail—going there—and I heard the shot. I know Dakota killed him."

Langford made an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Well, it isn't so bad, after all. You'll have to be a witness against Dakota. And very likely Doubler will die—probably is dead by this time; will certainly be dead before the Lazette doctor can reach his cabin. No, my dear," he added, smiling at Sheila, "it isn't so bad, after all."

Sheila rose. Her poignant anger against him was equaled only by her disgust. He expected her to bear witness against Dakota; desired her to participate in his scheme to fasten upon the latter the entire blame for the commission of a crime in which he himself was the moving factor.

"I shall not bear witness against him," she told Langford coldly. "For I am going away—back East—tomorrow. Don't imagine that I have been in complete ignorance of what has been going on; that I have been unaware of the part you have played in the shooting of Doubler. I have known for quite a long while that you had decided to have Doubler murdered, and only recently I learned that you hired Dakota to kill him. And this morning, when I met Dakota on the river trail, he dropped this from a pocket of his vest." She fumbled at her bodice and produced the signed agreement, holding it out to him.

As she expected, he repudiated it, though his face paled a little as he read it.

"This is a forgery, my dear," he said.

"No," she returned calmly, "it is not a forgery. You forget that only a minute ago you practically admitted it to be a true agreement by telling me that I should have allowed Doubler to die. You are an accomplice in the shooting of Doubler, and if I am compelled to testify in Dakota's trial I shall tell everything I know."

She watched while he lighted a match, held it to the paper, smiling as the licking flames consumed it. He was entirely composed now, and through the gathering darkness of the interior of the office she saw a sneer come into his face.

"I shall do all I can to assist you to discontinue the associations which are so distasteful to you. You will start for the East immediately, I presume?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "In the afternoon. I shall have my trunks taken over to Lazette in the morning." She took a step toward the door, but halted before reaching it, turning to look back at him.

"I don't think it is necessary for me to say good-by. But you have not treated me badly in the past, and I thank you—for that—and wish you well."

"Where are you going?"

Sheila had walked to the door and stood with one hand on the latch. He came and stood beside her, a suppressed excitement in his manner, his eyes gleaming brightly in the dusk which had suddenly fallen.

"Ben Doubler is alone, and he needs care. I am going to him—to stay with him until the doctor arrives. He will die if someone does not take care of him."

"You are determined to continue to meddle, are you?" he said, his voice quivering with anger, his lips working strangely. "I am sick of your damned interference. Sick of it, I tell you!" His voice lowered to a harsh, throaty whisper. "You won't leave this office until tomorrow afternoon! Do you hear? What business is it of yours if Doubler dies?"

Sheila did not answer, but pressed the door latch. His arm suddenly interposed, his fingers closing on her arm, gripping it so tightly that she cried out with pain. Then suddenly his fingers were boring into her shoulders; she was twisted, helpless in his brutal grasp, and flung bodily into the chair beside the desk, where she sat, sobbing breathlessly.

She did not cry out again, but sat motionless, her lips quivering, rubbing her shoulders where his iron fingers had sunk into the flesh, her soul filled with a revolting horror for his brutality.

FOR a moment there was no movement. Then, in the semi-darkness she saw him leave the door; watched him as he approached a shelf on which stood a kerosene lamp, lifted the chimney and applied a match to the wick. For an instant after replacing the chimney he stood full

in the glare of light, his face contorted with rage, his eyes gleaming with venom.

"Now you know exactly where I stand!" he said. "I'm your father, damn you! Your father—do you hear? And I'll not have you go back East to gab and gossip about me. You'll stay here, and you'll bear witness against Dakota, and you'll keep quiet about me!" He was trembling horribly as he came close to her, and his breath was coughing in his throat shrilly.

"I won't do anything of the kind!" Sheila got to her feet, and stood, rigid with anger. "I am going to Doubler's cabin this minute, and if you molest me again I shall go to the sheriff with my story!"

He seemed about to attack her again, and his hands were raised as though to grasp her throat, when there came a sound at the door, it swung open, and Dakota stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Dakota's face was white. There was an entire absence of excitement in his manner, no visible sign to tell that what he had seen on entering the cabin disturbed him in the least. Yet the whiteness of his face belied this apparent composure.

Sheila retreated to the chair beside the desk and sank into it. Langford had wheeled and was now facing Dakota, a shallow smile on his face.

There was a smile on Dakota's face, too; a mysterious, cold, prepared grin that fascinated Sheila as she watched him. The smile faded a little when he spoke to Langford, his voice vibrating, as though he had been running.

"When you're fighting a woman, Langford, you ought to make sure there isn't a man around!"

Langford did not answer him, stepping back against the desk and regarding him with a mirthless, forced smile.

"So you haven't got any thoughts just at this minute," said Dakota with cold insinuation. "You are one of those men who can talk bravely enough to women, but who can't think of anything exactly proper for a man to hear. Well, you'll do your talking later." He looked at Sheila, ignoring Langford completely.

"I expect you've been wondering, ma'am, why I'm here, when I ought to be over at the Two Forks, trying to do something for Doubler. But the doctor's there, taking care of him. The reason I've come is that I've found this in Doubler's cabin." He drew out the memoranda and held it up so that she might see.

"You took my vest," he went on. "And I was looking for it. I found it all right, but something was missing. Something has been taken out of it, a paper. That's why I rode over here—to see if you'd got it. Have you, ma'am?"

Sheila pointed mutely to the floor, where a bit of thin, crinkled ash was all that remained of the signed agreement.

"Burned!" said Dakota sharply.

He caught Sheila's nod and questioned coldly:

"Who burned it?"

"My—Mr. Langford," returned Sheila.

"You found it and showed it to him, and he burned it," said Dakota slowly. "Why?"

"Don't you see? It was evidence against him," she concluded, indicating her father.

"I reckon I see." The smile was entirely gone out of Dakota's face now, and as he turned to look at Langford there was an expression in his eyes which chilled the latter.

"You've flunked on the agreement. You've burned it—won't recognize it, eh? Well, I'm not any surprised."

Langford had partially recovered from the shock occasioned by Dakota's unexpected appearance, and he shook his head in emphatic, brazen denial.

"There was no agreement between us, my friend," he said. "The paper I burned was a forgery."

Dakota's lips hardened. "You called me your friend once before, Langford," he said coldly. "Don't do it again or I'll forget that you are Sheila's father. I reckon she has told you about Doubler. That's why I came over here to get the paper, for I knew that if you got hold of it you'd make short work of it. I know something else." He took a step forward. "I know that you've sent Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. The doctor told me he'd met him, —Duncan—and the doctor says Duncan told him that you'd said that I fixed Doubler. How do you know I did?"

"Duncan saw you," said Langford.

Dakota's lips curled. "Duncan tell you that?" he questioned.

At Langford's nod he laughed harshly. "So it's a plant, eh?" he said with a mirthless chuckle. "You are figuring to get two birds with one stone—Doubler and me. You've already got Doubler, or think you have, and now it's my turn. It does look pretty bad for me, for a fact, doesn't it? You've burned the agreement you made with me, so that you could slip out of your

obligation. I reckon you think that after the sheriff gets me you'll be able to take the Star without any trouble—like you expect to take Doubler's land.

"You've got Duncan to swear that he saw me do for Doubler, and you've got your daughter to testify that she saw me on the trail, coming from Doubler's cabin right after she heard the shooting. It was a right clever scheme, but it was my fault for letting you get anything on me—I ought to have known that you'd try some dog's trick or other."

HIS voice was coming rapidly, sharply, and was burdened with a lashing sarcasm. "Yes, it's a right clever scheme, Mister Langford, and it ought to be successful. But there's one thing you've forgot. I've lived too long in this country to let anyone tangle me up like you'd like to have me. When a man gets double crossed in this country, he can't go to the law for redress—he makes his own laws. I'm making mine. You've double crossed me, and damn your hide, I'm going to send you over the divide in a hurry!"

One of his heavy revolvers leaped from its holster and showed for an instant in his right hand. Sheila had been watching closely, forewarned by Dakota's manner, and when she saw his right hand drop to the holster she sprang upon him, catching the weapon by the muzzle.

Langford had covered his face with his hands, and stood beside the desk, trembling, and Sheila cried aloud in protest when she saw Dakota draw the weapon that swung at his other hip, holding her off with the hand which she had seized. But when Dakota saw Langford's hands go to his face he hesitated, smiling scornfully. He turned to Sheila, looking down at her face close to his, his smile softening.

"I forgot," he said gently; "I forgot he is your father."

"It isn't that," she said. "He isn't my father, any more. But"—she looked at Dakota pleadingly—"please don't shoot him. Go—leave the country. You have plenty of time. You have enough to answer for. Please go!"

For answer he grasped her by the shoulders, swinging her around so that she faced him—as he had forced her to face him on the river trail.

"You told him"—he jerked a thumb toward Langford— "that you wouldn't bear witness against me. I heard you. You're a white girl, and your father's a fool or he wouldn't lose you, like he is going to lose you. If I had you I would take mighty good care that you didn't get away from me. You've given me some mighty good advice, and I would act on it if I was guilty of shooting Doubler. But I didn't shoot him—your father and Duncan have framed up on me. Doubler isn't dead yet, and so I'm not running away. If Doubler had someone to nurse him, he might—" He hesitated and looked at her with a strange smile. "You think I shot Doubler, too, don't you? Well, there's a chance that if we can get Doubler revived he can tell who did shoot him. Do you want to know the truth? I heard you say a while ago, that you intended going over to Doubler's shack to nurse him. If you're still of the same mind, I'll take you over there."

Sheila was at the door in an instant, but halted on the threshold to listen to Dakota's parting word.

"Langford," he said, "there's just one thing that I want to say to you. There's a day coming when you'll think thoughts —plenty of them."

In a flash he had stepped outside the door and closed it after him.

A few minutes later, still standing beside the desk, Langford heard the rapid beat of hoofs on the hard sand of the corral yard. Faint they became, and their rhythmic beat faster, until they died away entirely. But Dakota's words still lingered in Langford's mind, and it seemed to him that they conveyed a prophecy.

CHAPTER XIV

The Parting on the River Trail

I'LL be leaving you now, ma'am." There was a good moon, and its mellow light streamed full into Dakota's grim, travel-stained face as he halted his pony on the crest of a slope above the Two Forks and pointed out a light that glimmered weakly through the trees on a level some distance on the other side of the river.

"There's Doubler's cabin—where you see that light," he continued, speaking to Sheila in a low voice. "Do what you can for Doubler. I'm going down to my shack. I've done a heap of riding today, and I

don't feel exactly like I want to keep going on, unless it's important."

Sheila had turned her head from him. He was exhibiting a perfectly natural aversion toward visiting the man he had nearly killed, she assured herself with a shudder, and she felt no pity for him. He had done her a service, however, in appearing at the Double R at a most opportune time, and she was grateful. Therefore she lingered, finding it hard to choose words.

"I am sorry," she finally said.

"I reckon you've got the same notion as your father—that I shot Doubler?" he said, watching her narrowly. "You are willing to take Duncan's word for it?"

"Duncan's word, and the agreement which I found in the pocket of your vest," she returned, without looking at him. "I suppose that is proof enough?"

"Well," he said with a bitter laugh, "it does look bad for me, for a fact. I can't deny that. And I don't blame you for thinking as you do. But you heard what I told your father about the shooting of Doubler being a plant. I didn't shoot Doubler. I wouldn't shoot him."

"Of course you would deny it," she said.

"Well," he said resignedly, "I reckon that's all. I can't say that I expected anything else. I've done some things in my life that I've regretted, but I've never told a lie when the truth would do as well. There is no reason now why I should lie, and so I want you to know that I am telling the truth when I say that I didn't shoot Doubler. Won't you believe me?"

"No," she returned, unaffected by the earnestness in his voice. "You were at Doubler's cabin when I heard the shot—I met you on the trail. You killed that man, Blanca, over in Lazette, for nothing. You didn't need to kill him; you shot him in pure wantonness. But you killed Doubler for money. You would have killed my father had I not been there to prevent you. Perhaps you can't help killing people. You have my sympathy on that account, and I hope that in time you will do better—will reform. But I don't believe you."

"You forgot to mention one other crime," he reminded her in a low voice, not without a trace of sarcasm.

"I have not forgotten it. I will never forget it. But I forgive you, for in comparison to your other crimes your sin against me was trivial—though it was great enough."

"I thought," he began, and then stopped short. "Well, I reckon it doesn't make much difference what I thought. I'm keeping quiet until—until the time comes. Maybe that won't be so long, and then you'll understand. I'll be seeing you again."

"I am leaving this country tomorrow," she informed him coldly.

SHE saw him start and experienced a sensation of vindictive satisfaction.

"Well," he said, with a queer note of regret in his voice, "that's too bad. But I reckon I'll be seeing you again anyway, if the sheriff doesn't get me."

"Do you think they will come for you tonight?" she asked, suddenly remembering that her father had told her that Duncan had gone to Lazette for the sheriff. "What will they do?"

"Nothing, I reckon. That is, they won't do anything except take me into custody. They can't do anything until Doubler dies."

"If he doesn't die?" she said. "What can they do then?"

"Usually it isn't considered a crime to shoot a man—if he doesn't die. They might want me to leave the country. But I don't reckon that I'm going to let them take me—whether Doubler dies or not. Once they've got a man it's pretty easy to prove him guilty—in this country. Usually they hang a man and consider the evidence afterward. I'm not letting them do that to me. If I was guilty I suppose I might look at it differently, but maybe not."

Sheila was silent; he became silent, too, and looked gravely at her.

"Well," he said presently, "I'll be going." He urged his pony forward, but when it had gone only a few steps he turned and looked back at her. "Do your best to keep Doubler alive," he said.

Stifling a sigh of regret and pity, she spoke to her pony, and the animal shuffled down the long slope, forded the river, and so brought her to the door of Doubler's cabin.

The doctor was there; he was bending over Doubler at the instant Sheila entered the cabin, and he looked up at her with grave, questioning eyes.

"I am going to nurse him," she informed the doctor.

"That's good," he returned softly; "he needs lots of care—the care that a woman can give him."

Then he went off into a maze of medical terms and phrases that left her confused, but out of which she gathered the fact that the bullet had missed a vital spot, that Doubler was suffering more from shock than from real injury, and that the only danger — his constitution being strong enough to withstand the shock—would be from blood poisoning. He had some fever, the doctor told Sheila, and he left a small vial on a shelf with instructions to administer a number of drops of its contents in a spoonful of water if Doubler became restless. The bandages were to be changed several times a day, and the wound bathed.

The doctor was glad that she had come, for he had a very sick patient in Mrs. Moreland, and he must return to her immediately. He would try to look in in a day or two. No, he said, in answer to her question, she could not leave Doubler tomorrow, even to go home—if she wanted the patient to get well.

And so Sheila watched him as he went out and saddled his horse and rode away down the river trail. Then with a sigh she returned to the cabin, closed the door, and took up her vigil beside the nester.

CHAPTER XV

Sheriff Allen Takes a Hand

THE sheriff's posse—three men whom he had deputized in Lazette and himself — had ridden hard over the twenty miles of rough trail from Lazette, for Duncan had assured Allen that he would have to get into action before Dakota could discover that there had been a witness to his deed, and therefore when they arrived at the edge of the clearing next to Dakota's cabin at midnight, they were glad of an opportunity to dismount and stretch themselves.

There was no light in Dakota's cabin, no sign that the man the sheriff was after was anywhere about, and the latter consulted gravely with his men.

"This ain't going to be any picnic, boys," he said. "We've got to take our time and keep our eyes open. Dakota ain't no spring chicken, and if he don't want to come with us peaceable, he'll make things plumb lively."

A careful examination of the horses in the corral resulted in the discovery of one which had evidently been ridden hard and unsaddled but a few minutes before.

However, the discovery of the pony told the sheriff nothing beyond the fact that Dakota had ridden to the cabin from somewhere, some time before. Whether he was asleep, or watching the posse from some vantage point within or outside of the cabin was not quite clear. Therefore Allen, the sheriff, a man of much experience, advised caution. Telling his deputies to remain concealed on the edge of the clearing, Allen proceeded boldly to the door of the cabin and knocked loudly. He and Dakota had always been very friendly.

At the sound of the knock, Dakota's voice came from within the cabin.

"Sorry, Allen," it said, "but I'm locked up for the night. Can't take any chances on leaving my door unbarred—can't tell who's prowling around. If you'd sent word, now, so I would have had time to dress decently, I might have let you in, seeing it's you. I'm sure some sorry."

"Sorry, too." Allen grinned at the door. "I told the boys you'd be watching. Well, it can't be helped, I reckon. Only, I'd like mighty well to see you. Coming out in the morning?"

"Maybe. Missed my beauty sleep already." His voice was dryly sarcastic. "It's too bad you rode this far for nothing; can't even get a look at me. But it's no time to visit a man, anyway. You and your boys flop outside. We'll swap palaver in the morning. Good night."

"Good night."

Allen returned to the edge of the clearing, where he communicated to his men the result of the conference.

"He ain't allowing that he wants to be disturbed just now," he told them. "And he's too damned polite to monkey with. We'll wait. Likely he'll change his mind over-night."

"Wait nothing," growled Duncan. "Bust the door in!"

Allen grinned mildly. "Good advice," he said quietly. "Me and my men will set here while you do the busting. Don't imagine that we'll be sore because you take the lead in such a little matter as that."

"If I was sheriff—" began Duncan.

"Sure," interrupted Allen with a dry laugh; "if you was the sheriff. There's a lot of things we'd do if we was somebody else. Maybe breaking down Dakota's door is one of them. But we don't want anyone killed if we can help it, and it's a dead sure thing that someone would cash in if we tried any monkey business with that door. If you're wanting to do something that

amounts to something to help this game along, swap your cayuse for one of Dakota's and hit the breeze to the Double R for grub. We'll be needing it by the time you get back."

Duncan had already ridden over sixty miles within the past twenty-four hours, and he made a grumbling rejoinder. But in the end he roped one of Dakota's horses, saddled it, and presently vanished in the darkness. Allen and his men built a fire near the edge of the clearing and rolled into their blankets.

At eight o'clock the following morning, Langford appeared on the river trail, leading a pack horse loaded with provisions and cooking utensils for the sheriff and his men. Duncan, Langford told Allen while they breakfasted, had sought his bunk, being tired from the day's activities.

"You're the owner of the Double R?" questioned Allen.

"You and Dakota friendly?" he questioned again, noting Langford's nod.

"We've been quite friendly," smiled Langford.

"But you ain't now?"

"Not since this has happened. We must have law and order, even at the price of friendship."

ALLEN squinted a mildly hostile eye at Langford. "That's a good principle to get back of—for a weak-kneed friendship. But most men who have got friends wouldn't let a little thing like law and order interfere between them."

Langford reddened. "I haven't known Dakota long of course," he defended. "Perhaps I erred in saying we were friends. Acquaintances would better describe it I think."

"I always had a heap of faith in Dakota's judgment," Allen said. And then, when Langford's face flushed with a realization of the subtle insult, Allen said gruffly:

"You say Doubler's dead?"

"I don't remember to have said that to you," returned Langford, his voice snapping with rage. "What I did say was that Duncan saw him killed and came to me with the news. I sent him for you. Since then my daughter has been over to Doubler's cabin. He is quite dead, she reported," he lied. "There can be no doubt of his guilt, if that is what bothers you," he continued. "Duncan saw him shoot Doubler in the back with Doubler's own rifle, and my daughter heard the shot and met Dakota coming from Doubler's cabin, immediately after. It's a clear case, it seems to me."

"Yes, clear," said Allen. "The evidence is all against him."

Yet it was not all quite clear to Langford. To be sure, he had expected to receive news that Dakota had accomplished the destruction of Doubler, but he had not anticipated the fortunate appearance of Duncan at the nester's cabin during the commission of the murder, nor had he expected Sheila to be near the scene of the crime. It had turned out better than he had planned, for since he had burned the agreement that he had made with Dakota, the latter had no hold on him whatever, and if it were finally proved that he had committed the crime there would come an end to both Dakota and Doubler.

Only one thing puzzled him. Dakota had been to his place, he knew that he was charged with the murder and that the agreement had been burned. He also knew that Duncan and Sheila would bear witness against him. And yet, though he had had an opportunity to escape he had not done so. Why not?

He put this interrogation to Allen, carefully avoiding reference to anything which would give the sheriff any idea of his suspicion that Dakota was not really guilty.

"That's what's bothering me!" declared the latter. "He's had time enough to hit the breeze clear out of the Territory. Though," he added, squinting at Langford, "Dakota ain't never been much on the run. He'd a heap rather face the music."

He finished his breakfast in silence, and then again approached the door of Dakota's cabin, knocking loudly, as before.

"I'm wanting that palaver now, Dakota," he said coaxingly.

He heard Dakota laugh. "Have you viewed the corpse, Allen?"

"No," said Allen.

"You're a hell of a sheriff—wanting to take a man when you don't know whether he's done anything."

"I reckon you ain't fooling me none," said Allen slowly. "The evidence is dead against you."

"What evidence?"

"Duncan saw you fixing Doubler, and Langford's daughter met you coming from his cabin."

"Who told you that?"

"Langford. He's just brought some grub over."

THE silence that followed Allen's words lasted long, and the sheriff fidgeted impatiently. When he again spoke there was the sharpness of intolerance in his voice.

"If talking to you was all I had to do, I might monkey around here all summer," he said. "I don't like to get into any gun argument with you, because I know that somebody will get hurt. Why in hell don't you surrender decently? I'm a friend of yours and you hadn't ought to want to make any trouble for me. And them's good boys that I've got over there and I wouldn't want to see any of them perforated. And I'd hate like blazes to have to put you out of business. Why don't you act decent and come out like a man?"

"Go and look at the corpse," insisted Dakota.

"There'll be plenty of time to look at the corpse after you're took."

There was no answer. Allen sighed regretfully. "Well," he said presently, "I've done what I could. From now on, I'm looking for you."

"Just a minute, Allen," came Dakota's voice. To Allen's surprise he heard a fumbling at the fastenings of the door, and an instant later it swung open and Dakota stood in the opening, one of his six-shooters in hand.

"I reckon I know you well enough to be tolerably sure that you'll get me before you leave here," he said, as Allen wheeled and faced him, his arms folded over his chest as a declaration of his present peaceful intentions. "But I want you to get this business straight before anything is started. And then you'll be responsible. I'm giving it to you straight. Somebody's framed up on me. I didn't shoot Doubler. When I left him he was cleaning his rifle. After I left him I heard shooting. I thought it was him trying his rifle, or I would have gone back.

"Doubler isn't dead. At least he wasn't dead when I left the doctor with him at sundown. It's because I knew he wasn't dead I took a chance on staying here. I'm not allowing that I'm going to let anyone hang me for a thing I didn't do, and so if you're determined to get me without making sure that Doubler's going to have mourners immediately, it's a dead sure thing that someone's going to get hurt. I reckon that's all. I've given you fair warning, and after you get back to the edge of the clearing our friendship don't count any more."

He stepped back and closed the door.

Allen walked slowly toward the clearing, thinking seriously. He said nothing to Langford or his men concerning his conversation with Dakota. Several times during the morning he was on the point of planning an attack on the cabin, but Dakota's voice had a ring of truth in it and he delayed action, waiting for some more favorable turn of events.

And so the hours dragged. The afternoon waned; the sun descended to the peaks of the mountains, and there was still inaction on Allen's part, still silence from the cabin. Just at sundown Allen called his men to him and told them to guard the cabin closely, not to shoot unless forced by Dakota, but to be certain that he did not escape.

He said they might expect him to return by dawn of the following morning. Then, loping his pony up the river trail, he started toward Ben Doubler's cabin.

CHAPTER XVI

Doubler Talks

AFTER the departure of the doctor Sheila entered the cabin and closed the door, fastening the bars and drawing a chair over near the table. Doubler seemed to be resting easier, though there was a flush in his cheeks that told of the presence of fever. At intervals during the night she gave him quantities of the medicine which the doctor had left. Several times she changed the bandages and once or twice during the night when he moaned she pulled her chair over beside him and smoothed his forehead, soothing him. When the dawn came it found her heavy eyed and tired.

She went to the river and procured fresh water, washed her hands and face, prepared a breakfast of bacon and soda biscuit, and then, as Doubler seemed to be doing nicely, she saddled her pony and took a short gallop. Returning, she entered the cabin, to find Doubler tossing restlessly.

She gave him a dose of the medicine—an extra large one—but it had little effect. Evidently he was growing worse.

Through the slow-dragging hours of the morning she sat beside him, giving him the best care possible under the circumstances, but in spite of her efforts the fever steadily rose, and at noon he sat suddenly up in the bunk and gazed at her with blazing, vacuous eyes.

"You're a liar!" he shouted. "Dakota's square!"

Sheila stifled a scream of fear and shrank from him. But recovering, she went to him, seizing his shoulders and forcing him back into the bunk. He did not resist, not seeming to pay any attention to her at all, but he mumbled, inexpressively:

"It ain't so, I tell you. He's just left me, an' any man which could talk like he talked to me ain't—I reckon not," he said, shaking his head with a vigorous, negative motion; "you're a heap mistaken—you ain't got him right at all."

He was quiet for a time after this, but toward the middle of the afternoon, Sheila saw that his gaze was following her as she paced softly back and forth in the cabin.

"So you're stuck on that Langford girl, are you?" he demanded, laughing. "Well, it won't do you any good, Dakota, she's—well, she's some sore at you for something. She won't listen to anything which is said about you." The laughter died out of his eyes; they became cold with menace. "I ain't listenin' to any more of that sorta talk, I tell you! I've got my eyes open. Why!" he said in surprise, starting up, "he's gone!" He suddenly shuddered and cursed. "In the back," he said. "You—you—" And profanity gushed from his lips. Then he collapsed, closing his eyes, and lay silent and motionless.

Out of the jumble of disconnected sentences Sheila was able to gather two things of importance—perhaps three.

The first was that someone had told him of Dakota's complicity in the plan to murder him and that he refused to believe his friend capable of such depravity. The second was that he knew who had shot him; he also knew the man who had informed him of Dakota's duplicity—though this knowledge would amount to very little unless he recovered enough to be able to supply the missing threads.

Sheila despaired of him supplying anything, for it seemed that he was steadily growing worse, and when the dusk came she began to feel a dread of remaining with him in the cabin during the night. If only the doctor would return! If Dakota would come—Duncan, her father, anybody! When darkness succeeded dusk she lighted the kerosene lamp and seated herself at the table, determined to indulge in a short nap.

It seemed that she had scarcely dropped off to sleep—though in reality she had been unconscious for more than two hours—when she awoke suddenly, to see Doubler sitting erect in the bunk, watching her. There was the light of reason in his eyes and her heart gave an ecstatic leap.

"Could you give me a drink of water, ma'am?" he said, in the voice that she knew well.

She sprang to the pail, to find that it contained very little. She had lifted it, and was about to go to the river to procure fresh water, when Doubler's voice arrested her.

"There's some water there—I can hear it splashin'. It'll do well enough just now. You can get some fresh after a while. I want to talk to you."

She placed the pail down and went over to him, standing beside him.

"What is it?" she asked.

"How long have you been here?"

"This is the second night."

"Was someone else here, too?"

"The doctor and Dakota."

"Where's Dakota now?"

"At his cabin, I suppose. He didn't stay here long—he left right after he brought the doctor. I imagine you know why he didn't stay. He was afraid that you would recognize him and accuse him."

"Accuse him of what, ma'am?"

"Of shooting you."

HE smiled. "I reckon, ma'am, that you don't understand. It wasn't Dakota that shot me."

"Who did, then?" she questioned eagerly. "Who?"

"Duncan."

"Why—why—" she said, sitting suddenly erect, a mysterious elation filling her, "Why, I saw Dakota on the river trail just after you were shot."

"He'd just left me. He hadn't been gone more than ten minutes or so when Duncan rode up—comin' out of the timber just down by the crick. Likely he'd been hidin' there. I was cleanin' my rifle; we had words, and when I set my rifle down just outside the shack, he grabbed it an'

shot me. After that I don't seem to remember a heap."

"Oh!" she said. "I am *so* glad!"

She was thinking now of Dakota's parting words to her the night before on the crest of the slope above the river—of his words, of the truth of his statement denying his guilt, and she was glad that she had not spoken some of the spiteful things which had been in her mind.

"I reckon it's something to be glad for," smiled Doubler, misunderstanding her elation, "but I reckon I owe it to you—I'd have pulled my freight sure, if you hadn't come when you did. An' I told you not to be comin' here any more."

"You are going to live a long while," she said. And then, to his surprise, she bent over and kissed his forehead, leaving his side instantly, her cheeks aflame. To conceal her emotion from Doubler she seized the water pail.

"I will get some fresh water," she said.

She opened the door and stepped down into the darkness.

There was a moon, and the trail to the river was light enough for her to see plainly. She reached the river and walked along its bank for a little distance, searching for a deep accessible spot into which she could dip the pail.

The shallow crossing was not far away, and when she stooped to fill the pail she heard a sudden clatter and splashing, and looked up to see a horseman riding into the water from the opposite side of the river.

He saw her at the instant she discovered him, and once over the ford he turned his horse and rode directly toward her.

After gaining the bank he halted his pony and looked intently at her.

"You're Langford's daughter, I reckon," he said.

"Yes," she returned, seeing that he was a stranger; "I am."

"I'm Ben Allen," he said shortly; "the sheriff of this county. What are you doing here?"

"I am taking care of Ben Doubler," she said; "he has been—"

"Then he ain't dead, of course," said Allen, interrupting her.

"He is very much better now," she told him.

"Able to talk?"

"Yes. He has just been talking to me." She took a step toward him, speaking earnestly and rapidly. "I suppose you are looking for Dakota," she said, remembering what her father had told her about sending Duncan to Lazette for the sheriff. "If you are looking for him, I want to tell you that he didn't shoot Doubler. It was Duncan. Doubler told me so not over five minutes ago. He said—"

But Allen had spurred his pony forward, and before she could finish he was out of hearing distance, riding swiftly toward the cabin.

Sheila lingered at the water's edge, for now suddenly she saw much beauty in the surrounding country, and she was no longer lonesome.

"Oh!" she said irrelevantly, "he isn't so bad, after all!"

Stooping over again to fill the pail, she heard a sharp clatter of hoofs behind her. A horseman was racing toward the river—toward her—bending low over his pony's mane, riding desperately. She placed the pail down and watched him. Apparently he did not see her, for, swerving suddenly, he made for the crossing without slackening speed. He had almost reached the water's edge when there came a spurt of flame from the door of Doubler's cabin, followed by the crack of a rifle!

In the doorway of the cabin, outlined against the light of the interior, was a man. And as Sheila watched another streak of fire burst from the door, and she heard the shrill sighing of the bullet, heard the horseman curse. But he did not stop in his flight, and in an instant he had crossed the river. She saw him for an instant as he was outlined against the clear sky in the moonlight that bathed the crest of the slope, and then he was gone.

Dropping the pail, Sheila ran toward the cabin, fearing that Doubler had suddenly become delirious and had attacked Allen. But it seemed to her that it had not been Allen who had raced away from the cabin, and she had not gone more than half way toward it when she saw another horseman coming. She halted to wait for him, and when he halted and drew up beside her she saw that it was the sheriff.

"Who was it?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Duncan!" Allen cursed picturesquely and profanely. "When I got to the shack he was inside, standing over Doubler strangling him. The damned skunk! You was right," he added; "It was him who

shot Doubler!" He continued rapidly, grimly, taking a piece of paper from a pocket and writing something on it.

"My men have got Dakota corraled in his cabin. If he tried to get away they will do for him. I don't want that to happen; there's too few square men in the country as it is. Take this"—he held out the paper to her—"and get down to Dakota's cabin with it. Give it to Bud—one of my men—and tell him to scatter the others and try to head off Duncan if he comes that way. I'm after him!"

CHAPTER XVII

For Dakota

SHEILA ran to the river and secured the water, aware that it might be needed now more than ever. Then, hurrying as best she could with the weight of the pail, she returned to the cabin.

She was relieved to find that Doubler had received no injury, and she paused long enough to allow him to tell her that Duncan had entered the cabin shortly after she had left it. He had attacked Doubler, but had been interrupted by Allen, who had suddenly ridden up. Duncan had heard him coming, and had concealed himself behind the door, and when Allen had entered Duncan had struck him on the head with the butt of his six-shooter, knocking him down. The blow had been a glancing one, however, and Allen had recovered quickly, seizing Doubler's rifle and trying to bring down the would-be murderer as he fled.

While attending to Doubler's bandages, Sheila repeated the conversation she had had with Allen concerning Dakota, and instantly the nester's anxiety for his friend took precedence over any thoughts for his own immediate welfare.

"There'll be trouble sure, now that Allen's left there," he said. "Dakota won't be a heap easy with them deputies."

He told Sheila to let the bandaging go until later, but she refused.

"Dakota'll be needin' you a heap more than I need you," he insisted, refusing to allow her to touch the bandages. "There'll be the devil to pay if any of them deputies try to rush Dakota's shack. I want you to go down there right now. If you wait, it'll mebbe be too late."

Sheila hesitated for a moment, and then, yielding to the entreaty in Doubler's eyes, she was at his side, pressing his hand.

"Ride ma'am!" he told her, when she was ready to go, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

Her pony snorted with surprise when she brought her riding whip down against its flanks when turning from the corral gates, but it needed no second urging, and its pace when it splashed through the shallow water of the crossing was fully as great as that of Duncan's pony, which had previously passed through it.

Once on the hard sand of the river trail it settled into a long, swinging gallop, under which the miles flew by rapidly and steadily.

She did not blame herself for Dakota's dilemma, though she felt a keen regret over her treatment of him, over her unjust suspicions. He had really been in earnest when he had told her the night before on the river trail that he was not guilty. Vivid in her recollection was the curious expression on his face when he had said to her just before leaving her that night:

"Won't you believe me?"

And that other time, when he had taken her by the shoulders and looked steadily into her eyes—she remembered that, too; she could almost feel his fingers, and the words he had uttered then were fresh in her memory: "I've treated you mean, Sheila; about as mean as a man could treat a woman. I am sorry. I want you to believe that. And maybe some day—when this business is over—you'll understand, and forgive me."

When she reached the rise—on the crest of which she had sat on her pony on the morning following her marriage to Dakota, she was trembling with eagerness and dread for fear that something might happen before she could arrive. It was three miles down the slope, and when she reached the level there was Dakota's cabin before her.

She drew her pony to a walk, for she saw men grouped in front of the cabin door, saw Dakota there himself, standing in the open doorway, framed in the light from within. There were no evidences of the conflict which she had dreaded. She had arrived in time.

HER father was there, she observed, as she drew nearer; and three strangers—and Allen! And near Allen, sitting on his horse dejectedly, was Duncan!

One of Duncan's arms swung oddly at his side, and Sheila thought instantly of his

curse when he had been riding near her at the river crossing. Evidently Allen's bullet had struck him.

Sheila's presence at Dakota's cabin was now unnecessary, for it was evident that an understanding had been reached with Allen, and Sheila experienced a sudden aversion to appearing among the men. Turning her pony, she was about to ride away, intending to return to Doubler's cabin, when Allen turned and saw her. He spurred quickly to her side, seizing the pony by the bridle rein and leading it toward the cabin door.

"It's all right, ma'am," he said, "I got him. Holy smoke!" he exclaimed as she came within the radius of the light. "You certainly rode some, didn't you, ma'am?"

She did not answer. She saw her father look at her, noted his start, smiled scornfully when she observed a paleness overspreading his face. She looked from him to Duncan, and the latter flushed and turned his head. Then Allen's voice reached her, as he spoke to Dakota.

"This young woman has rode twenty miles to-night—to save your hide—you durned cuss. If you was anyways hospitable, you'd—"

Allen's voice seemed to grow distant to Sheila, the figures of the men in the group blurred, the light danced, she reeled in the saddle, tried to check herself, failed, and toppled limply forward over her pony's neck. She heard an exclamation, saw Dakota spring suddenly from the doorway, felt his arms around her, and then she drifted into oblivion.

CHAPTER XVIII

Some Memories

WHEN Sheila recovered consciousness she was in Dakota's cabin—in the bunk in which she had lain on another night in the yesterday of her life in this country. She recognized it instantly. If it had been raining, she might have imagined that she was just awakening from a sleep in that other time. She felt a hand on her forehead, a damp cloth, and she opened her eyes to gaze fairly into Dakota's.

"Don't, please," she said, shrinking from him.

She lay for a long time, looking straight up at the ceiling, utterly tired, wondering vaguely what had become of her father, Duncan, Allen, and the others. She would have given much to have been able to lie there for a time—a long time—and rest. But that was not to be thought of. She struggled to a sitting position, and when her eyes had become accustomed to the light she saw her father sitting in a chair near the fireplace. The door was closed—barred. Sheila glanced again at her father, and then questioningly at Dakota, who was watching her from the center of the room, his face inscrutable.

"What does this mean? Where are the others?" she demanded.

"Allen and his men have gone back to Lazette," returned Dakota quietly. "This means"—he pointed to Langford—"that we're going to have a little talk—about things."

Sheila rose. "I don't care to hear any talk; I am not interested."

"You'll be interested in *my* talk," said Dakota.

Curiously, he seemed to be invested with a new character. Just now he was more like the man he had been the night she had met him the first time—before he had forced her to marry him—than he had been since.

Sheila resumed her seat on the edge of the bunk, watching him closely. He drew a chair over near the door, tilted it back and dropped into it, thus mutely announcing that he intended keeping the prisoners until he had delivered himself of that mysterious knowledge which seemed to be in his mind.

Glancing furtively at her father, Sheila observed that he appeared to have formed some sort of a conclusion regarding Dakota's actions also, for he sat very erect on his chair, staring at the latter, an intense interest in his eyes.

Sheila had become interested, too; she had forgotten her weariness. And yet Dakota's first words disappointed her—somehow they seemed irrelevant.

"This isn't such a big world, after all, is it?" He addressed both Sheila and her father, though he looked at neither. When he received no answer to his remark he looked up with a quiet smile.

"That has been said by a great many people, hasn't it? I've heard it many times. I reckon you have, too. But it's a fact, just the same. Take us three. You"—he said, pointing to Langford—"come out here from Albany and buy a ranch. You"—he smiled at Sheila—"came with your

father as a matter of course. You"—he looked again at Langford—"might have bought a ranch in another part of the country. You didn't need to buy this particular one. But you did. Take me. I spent five years in Dakota before I came here. I've been here five years.

"A MAN up in Dakota wanted me to stay there; said he'd do most anything for me if I would. But I didn't like Dakota. I came here, I like the place, and I've stayed here. I know that neither of you are very much interested in what has happened to me, but I've told you that much just to prove my contention about the world being a small place. It surely isn't so very big when you consider that three persons can meet up like we've met—our trails leading us to the same section of the country."

"I don't see how that concerns us."

"No," returned Dakota, and now there was a note of sarcasm in his voice, "you don't see. Lots of folks don't see. But there are trails that lead everywhere. Fate marks them out—blazes them. There are trails that lead us into trouble, others that lead us to pleasure—straight trails, crooked ones, trails that cross—all kinds. Folks start out on a crooked trail, trying to get away from something, but pretty soon another trail crosses the one they are on—maybe it will be a straight one that crosses theirs, with a straight man riding it.

"The man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight one meet at the place where the trails cross. Such trails don't lead to any tomorrow; they are yesterday's trails, and before the man riding the crooked trail and the man riding the straight trail can go any farther there has got to be an accounting. That is what has happened here. You"—he smiled gravely as he looked at Langford—"have been riding a crooked trail. I have been hanging onto the straight one as best I could. Now we've got to where the trails cross."

"Meaning that you want an explanation of my action in burning that signed agreemet, I suppose?" sneered Langford, looking up.

"Still trying to ride the crooked trail?" smiled Dakota. "I'm not worrying a bit about that agreement. Why, man, I'd have shot myself before I'd have shot Doubler. He's my friend—the only real friend I've had in ten years."

"Then when you signed the agreement you didn't mean to keep it?" questioned Langford incautiously, disarmed by Dakota's earnestness.

"Ten years ago a boy named Ned Keegles went to Dakota. I am glad to see that you are familiar with the name," he added with a smile as Langford started and stiffened in his chair, his face suddenly ashen. "You knowing Keegles will save me explaining a lot," continued Dakota. "Well, Keegles went to Dakota—where I was. He was eighteen and wasn't very strong, as young men go. But he got a job punching cows and I got to know him pretty well—used to bunk with him. He took a liking to me because I took an interest in him.

"He didn't like the work, because he had been raised differently. He lived in Albany before he went West. His father, William Keegles, was in the hardware business with a man named Langford—David Dowd Langford. You see, I couldn't be mistaken in the name of the man; it's such an uncommon one."

He smiled significantly at Sheila, and an odd expression came into her face, for she remembered that on the night of her coming he had made the same remark.

"One day Ned Keegles got sick and took me into his confidence. He wasn't in the West for his health, he said. He was a fugitive from the law, accused of murdering his father. It wasn't a nice story to hear, but he told it, thinking he was going to die."

Dakota smiled enigmatically at Sheila and coldy at the now shrinking man seated in the chair beside the fireplace.

"One day Keegles went into his father's office. His father's partner, David Dowd Langford, was there, talking to his father. They'd had hard words. Keegles' father had discovered that Langford had appropriated a large sum of the firm's money. By forging his partner's signature he had escaped detection until one day when the elder Keegles had accidentally discovered the fraud—which was the day on which Ned Keegles visited his father. It isn't necessary to go into detail, but it was perfectly plain that Langford was guilty.

"There were hard words, as I have said. The older Keegles threatened to prosecute. Langford seized a sample knife that had been lying on the elder Keegles' desk, and stabbed him, killing him instantly. Then,

while Ned Keegles stood by, stunned by the suddenness of the attack, Langford coolly walked to a telephone and notified the police of the murder. Hanging up the receiver, he raised the hue and cry, and a dozen clerks burst into the office, to find Ned Keegles bending over his father, trying to withdraw the knife.

"Langford accused Ned Keegles of the murder. He protested, of course, but seeing that the evidence was against him, he fought his way out of the office and escaped. He went to Dakota—where I met him." He hesitated and looked steadily at Langford. "Do you see how the trails have crossed? The crooked one and the straight one?"

Langford was leaning forward in his chair, a scared, wild expression in his eyes, his teeth and hands clenched in an effort to control his emotions.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "I didn't kill him! Ned Keegles—"

"Wait!" Dakota rose from his chair and walked to a shelf, from which he took a box, returning to Langford's side and opening it. He drew out a knife, shoving it before Langford's eyes and pointing out some rust spots on the blade.

"This knife was given to me by Ned Keegles!" he said slowly. "These rust spots on the blade are from his father's blood. Look at them!" he said sharply, for Langford had turned his head.

At the command he swung around, his gaze resting on the knife. "That's a pretty story," he sneered.

Dakota turned abruptly and walked to his chair, seating himself.

"Yes," he said, "it's a pretty story. But it isn't all been told. With a besmirched name and the thoughts which were with him all the time, life wasn't exactly a joyful one for Ned Keegles. He was young, you see, and it all preyed on his mind. But after a while it hardened him. He'd hit town with the rest of the boys, and he'd drink whiskey until he'd forget. But he couldn't forget long. He kept seeing his father and Langford; nights he'd start from his blankets, living over and over again the incident of the murder. He got so he couldn't stay in Dakota. He came down here and tried to forget. It was just the same—there was no forgetfulness.

"One night when he was on the trail near here, he met a woman. It was raining and the woman had lost the trail. He took the woman in. She interested him, and he questioned her. He discovered that she was the daughter of the man who had murdered his father—the daughter of David Dowd Langford!"

LANGFORD cringed and looked at Sheila, who was looking straight at Dakota, her eyes alight with knowledge.

"Ned Keegles kept his silence, as he had kept it for ten years," resumed Dakota. "But the coming of the woman brought back the bitter memories, and while the woman slept in his cabin he turned to the whiskey bottle for comfort. As he drank his troubles danced before him—magnified. He thought it would be a fine revenge if he should force the woman to marry him, for he figured that it would be a blow at the father's pride. If it hadn't been for a cowardly parson and the whiskey the marriage would never have occurred—Ned Keegles would not have thought of it. But he didn't hurt the woman; she left him pure as she came—mentally and physically

Langford slowly rose from his chair, his lips twitching, his face working strangely, his eyes wide and glaring.

"You say she married him—Ned Keegles?" he said, his voice high keyed and shrill. He turned to Sheila after catching Dakota's nod. "Is this true?" he demanded sharply. "Did you marry him as this man says you did?"

"Yes; I married him," returned Sheila dully, and Langford sank into his chair.

Dakota smiled with flashing eyes and continued:

"Keegles married the woman," he said coldly, "because he thought she was Langford's real daughter." He looked at Sheila with a glance of compassion. "Later, when Keegles discovered that the woman was only Langford's stepdaughter, he was mighty sorry. Not for Langford, however, because he could not consider Langford's feelings. And in spite of what he had done he was still determined to secure revenge.

"One day Langford came to Keegles with a proposal. He had seen Keegles kill one man, and he wanted to hire him to kill another—a man named Doubler. Keegles agreed, for the purpose of getting Langford into—"

Dakota hesitated, for Langford had risen to his feet and stood looking at him, his eyes bulging, his face livid.

"You!" he said, in a choking, wailing voice; "you—you are Ned Keegles! You —you— Why—" he hesitated and then passed a hand uncertainly over his forehead, looking from Sheila to Dakota with glazed eyes. "You—you are a liar!" he suddenly screamed, his voice raised to a maniacal pitch. "It isn't so! You—both of you—have conspired against me!"

"Wait!" Dakota got to his feet, walked to a shelf, and took down a small glass, a pair of shears, a shaving cup, and a razor. While Langford watched, staring at him with fearful, wondering eyes, Dakota deftly snipped off the mustache with the shears, lathered his lips, and shaved it clean. Then he turned and confronted Langford.

The latter looked at him with one, long, intense gaze, and then with a dry sob which caught in his throat and seemed to choke him, he covered his face with his hands, shuddered convulsively, and without a sound pitched forward, face down, at Dakota's feet.

CHAPTER XIX

Into the Unknown

AFTER a time Sheila rose from the bunk on which she had been sitting and stood in the center of the floor, looking down at her father. Dakota had not moved. He stood also, watching Langford, his face pale and grim, and he did not speak until Sheila had addressed him twice.

"What are you going to do now?" she said dully. "You hold his life in your hands."

"Do?" He smiled ironically at her. "What would you do? I have waited ten years for this day. It must go on to the end."

"The end?"

"Yes; the end," he said gravely. "He" —Dakota pointed to the prostrate figure— "must sign a written confession."

"And then?"

"He will return to answer for his crime."

Sheila shuddered and turned from him with bowed head.

"Oh!" she said at last; "it will be too horrible! My friends in the East—they will—"

"Your friends," he said with some bitterness. "Could your friends say more than my friends said when they thought that I had murdered my own father in cold blood and then run away?"

"But I am innocent," she pleaded.

"I was innocent," he returned, with a grave smile.

"Yes, but I could not help you, you know, for I wasn't there when you were accused. But you are here, and you can help me. Don't you see," she said, coming close to him, "don't you see that the disgrace will not fall on him, but on me. I will make him sign the confession," she offered, "you can hold it over him. He will make restitution of your property. But do not force him to go back East. Let him go somewhere—anywhere—but let him live. For, after all, he is my father—the only one I ever knew."

"But my vengeance," he said, the bitterness of his smile softening as he looked down at her.

"Your vengeance?" She came closer to him, looking up into his face. "Are we to judge—to condemn? Will not the power which led us three together—the power which you are pleased to call 'Fate'; the power that blazed the trail which you have followed from the yesterday of your life—will not this power judge him—punish him? Please," she pleaded, "please, for my sake, for—for"—her voice broke and she came forward and placed her hands on his shoulders—"for your wife's sake."

He looked down at her for an instant. Then his arms went around her, and she leaned against him, her head against his shoulder, while she wept softly.

AN hour later, standing side by side in the open doorway of the cabin, Sheila and Dakota watched in silence while Langford, having signed a confession dictated by Dakota, mounted his pony and rode slowly up the river trail toward Lazette.

He slowly passed the timber clump near the cabin, and with bowed head traveled up the long slope which led to the rise upon which, in another time, Sheila had caught her last glimpse of the parson. It was in the cold, bleak moment of the morning when darkness has not yet gone and the dawn not come, and Langford looked strangely desolate out there on the trail alone—alone with thoughts more desolate than his surroundings.

Sheila shivered and snuggled closer to Dakota. He looked down at her with a sympathetic smile.

"It is so lonesome," she said.

"Where?" he asked.

"Out there—where he is going."

Dakota did not answer. For a long time they watched the huddled form of the rider.

They saw him approach the crest of the rise—reach it. Then from the mountains in the eastern distance came a shaft of light, striking the summit of the rise where the rider bestrode his pony—throwing both into bold relief. For a moment the rider halted the pony, turned, glanced back an instant, and was gone.

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ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS SEPTEMBER 1st

MY HAT'S TOO SMALL

Really, you can't blame me for getting a swelled head. I'm just a human being, a very human sort of an egg, and just now I'm so gosh-awfully proud!

It isn't often that we editors get excited over stories. After all, we read them day in and day out, and they become sort of matter-of-fact with us. We know a good story from a not-so-good story, and we always try our utmost to publish the best possible stories we can find or have written to our order. So that when we come across a story that gets us excited or interested to a higher pitch than the regular run of good stories, why, it's somewhat of an event.

Take a look at the September issue of SMASHING NOVELS. Can you blame me for getting a swelled head? I said it's an event when I get excited over a story. Well, by gosh—there are four stories in SMASHING NOVELS that had me sitting on the edge of my seat and chewing my finger-nails. Four of them, mind you. And not just short stories, but four long, man-sized novels. The kind of yarns you can sink your teeth into and take a healthy chaw out of. You know, the kind of story that you enjoy so much that you hate to finish it. And believe me, in SMASHING NOVELS it takes time to finish any of the stories. They're novels, what I mean, novels!

Take a look at the line-up of writers. Peter B. Kyne heads the list with one of the swellest yarns of the sea that he has ever written. Remember Captain Scraggs, First Mate Gibney, Chief Engineer McGuffey and the good ship S. S. Maggie—Kyne's most famous characters? Well, they're the people around whom this novel is written.

And Will Jenkins. You all know Will Jenkins. You've read his stories in some of the biggest magazines ever published, and you've probably read "Outlaw Sheriff" and "Fighting Horse Valley" in the other DOUBLE ACTION MAGAZINES. Well, Will wrote "Khilit," a bang-up novel of the Malay Peninsula. And what a novel! It's got everything: action—adventure—humor—romance. Are you beginning to understand why my hat's too small?

Larry Harris—you've all read Larry's yarns before. Well, Larry wrote to me and said: "Cliff, I want to do a story of Pancho Villa, a real story of Pancho Villa, one that will show the old man as he really was. I knew Villa. I knew some of the men who rode with him. I can write a story about him and his Dorados that will ring true. It's a story that I want to write." Well, he wrote it. Did you ever stand up and cheer while you were reading a story? Well, I did while I read "Men from Hell." It's a Western adventure that's tops! Absolutely tops!!

And the detective novel:—"As the Clock Strikes Twelve," by Georg Alden Edson, is one of those yarns that keeps you guessing all the way through. Action—it's got more than action—it's got suspense. Real honest-to-gosh suspense.

You can't blame me 'cause my head's getting swelled. The magazine's a wow! The stories are the best ever! And I'm the editor. Well, you read the magazine. See if I'm not right. And remember, I'm sort of a human soul, and I like to know what you think. A pat on the back does me as much good as it does any of you. So why don't you kind of write, if you're in the mood:—"Dear Cliff, I think that your mag is the best ever"—or maybe you won't think so, then a good swift kick is always welcome, too. So come on, gang, let's hear from you— And until then—Happy Landings!!

—Cliff Campbell

BILL QUIRT
THE RAMBLING RANNY
by Jon L. Blummer
LOPE ALONG, FELLA. WE'LL SEE WHAT SORT O' PLACE MIST' LANE'S CREEK IS. BEIN' A MININ' OUTFIT OFFERS A HEAP O' MONEY FER IT.
2.
SUDDENLY THE HORSE SHIES.
3.
BILL WHIPS OUT HIS GUN AND SHOOTS THE HEAD OFF A HUGE RATTLER COILED BESIDE A GRINNING SKELETON!
4.
SKELETONS! MUST BE TWENTY OF THEM!
5.
A DISTANT ROAR REACHES BILL'S EARS. THE SKELETONS WAVER AND DANCE AS THE GROUND TREMBLES BENEATH QUIRT'S FEET. BLASTING!
6.

A SHOT RENDS THE FOLLOWING SILENCE. A BULLET WHINES AS IT GLANCES OFF A ROCK AN INCH FROM QUIRT'S HEAD.
7.
A WISP OF SMOKE CURLS FROM A BUSH. BILL FIRES AND TUMBLING DOWN THE STEEP SLOPE COMES HIS WOULD-BE ASSASSIN.
8.
A FUSILADE OF SHOTS SCATTER ABOUT THE FALLEN MAN AND FOLLOW BILL AS HE DRAGS HIM TO SHELTER.
9.
CRASHING THROUGH THE BRUSH COME A WAVE OF ATTACHERS. HAMMERING LEAD, QUIRT BEATS THEM OFF.
10.
WHAT'S THE IDEE OF ALL THIS, FELLA?
AMIGO, I AM SORREE I TRY SHOOT YOU. I MEESTAKE YOU FOR THOSE VER' BAD HOMBRES. I AM TRY TO RUN AWAY FROM THEM.
11.
I AM SLAVE FOR THEM EEN SILVER MINE. THESE SKELETONS ARE OF MEN WHO ALSO TRY RUN AWAY!
THAT MINE MUST BE THE ONE BELONGIN' TA MIST'LANE. I'LL ROOT 'EM OUTA THERE!
BUT, SENOR! THEY ARE MANY!
NEXT ISSUE...THE RAMBLING RANNY DIVES HEADLONG INTO A NEST O' TROUBLE IN THE SHAFT OF BLOODY SILVER!

WHEN JOHNNY SLOPED

By Clarence E. Mulford

JOHNNY NELSON hastened to the corner of the bunk house and then changed his pace until he seemed to ooze from there to the cook shack door, where he lazily leaned against the door jamb and ostentatiously picked his teeth with the negative end of a match. The cook looked up calmly, and calmly went on with his work; but if there was anything rasping enough to cause his soul to quiver it was the aforesaid calisthenics executed by Johnny and the match; for Cookie's blunt soul hated hints. If Johnny had demanded, even profanely and with large personal animus, why meals were not ahead of time, it would be a simple matter to heave something and enlarge upon his short-cut speech. But the subtleties left the cook floundering in a mire of rage—which he was careful to conceal from Johnny. The nuisance had been evincing undue interest in early suppers for nearly a month; it couldn't be tapeworms, because supper was the only meal involved, and furthermore, Johnny ate very little. So Cookie strangled the biscuit in his hand, but smiled at his tormentor.

"Well, all through?" he asked, glancing at Johnny's clothes.

"I'm hopin' to begin," and the toothpick moved rapidly.

Cookie condensed another biscuit:

"That's shore some stone," he said enviously, eying the two-carat diamond in Johnny's new blue tie. Johnny had never worn a tie before he became owner of the diamond, but with the stone came the realization of how lost it was in a neckerchief, how often covered by the wind-blown folds; so he had hastened to Buckskin and spent a dollar of Red's for the tie, thus exhausting both the supply of ties and Red's dollars. The honor of wearing the only tie and diamond in that section brought responsibilities, for he had spoken hastily to several humorous friends and stood a good chance of being licked therefor.

He threw away the match and scratched his back ecstatically on the door jamb while he strained his eyes trying to look under his chin. Fixed chins and short ties are trials one must learn to accept philosophically—and Johnny might have been spared the effort were it not for the fact that the tie had been made for a boy, and was awesomely shortened by encircling a sixteen-inch neck. It evidently had been made for a boy violently inclined toward a seafaring life, as suggested by the anchors embroidered in white down its middle.

"Lemme see it," urged Cookie, sighing because its owner had resolutely refused to play poker.

"How long?"

"Till supper's ready."

"Nix, but you can wear it twenty minutes if you'll get my grub quick," he replied. "Got to meet Lucas at half-past five." He cautiously dropped the match he had thoughtlessly produced.

The cook tried to look his belief and accepted the offer. Johnny's remarkably clean face, plastered hair and general gala attire suggested that Lucas was a woman —which Lucas profanely would have denied. Also, Johnny had been seen washing Ginger, and when a puncher washes a cayuse it's a sign of insanity. Besides, Ginger belonged to Red, who also had owned that lone dollar. Red's clothes did not fit Johnny.

"Goin' to surprise Lucas?" inquired the cook.

"What you mean?"

Cookie glanced meaningly at the attire: "Er—you ain't in th' habit of puttin' on war paint for to see Lucas, are you?"

Johnny's mental faculties produced: "Oh, we're goin' to a dance."

"Where 'bouts?" exploded the cook.

"Way up north!" One's mind needs to be active as a flea to lie properly to a man like the cook. He had made a ghastly mistake.

"By golly! I'll give th' boys cold grub an' go with you," and the cook began to save time.

Johnny gulped and shook his head: "Got a invite?"

Cookie caught the pan on his foot before it struck the floor and gasped: "Invite? Ain't it free-fer-all?"

"No; this is a high-toned thing-a-bob. Costs a dollar a head, too."

"High-toned?" snorted the cook, derisively. "Don't they know you? An' I thought Red was broke. Show me that permit!"

"Lucas' got it—that's why I've got to catch him."

"Oh! An' is he goin' all feathered up, too?"

"Shore, he's got to."

"Huh! He wouldn't dress like that to see a fight. Has she got any sisters?" Cookie finished, hopefully.

"Now what you talkin' about?"

"Why, Lucas," answered the cook, placidly. "Lemme tell you something. When you want to lose me have a invite to a water-drinkin' contest. An' before you go, be shore to rub Hoppy's boots some more; that's such a pasty shine it'll look like sand-paper before you get to the dance. You want to make it hard an' slippery. An' I've read som'ers that only wimmin ought to smell like a drug-store. You better let her do th' fumigatin'."

JOHNNY surrendered and dolefully whiffed the crushed violets he had paid two bits a pint for at El Paso—it was not necessary to whiff them, but he did so.

"You ought to hone yore razor, too," continued the cook, critically.

"I told Buck it was dull, I ain't goin' to sharpen it for him. But, say, are you shore about th' perfumery?"

"Why, of course."

"But how'll I git it off?"

"Bury th' clothes," suggested Cookie, grinning.

"I like yore gall! Which clothes are best, Pete's or Billy's?"

"Pete's would fit you like th' wide, wide

world. You don't want blankets on when you go courtin'. Try Billy's. An' I got a pair of socks, though one's green—but th' boots'll hide it."

"I didn't put none on my socks."

"How'd I know? But, say! Has she got any sisters?"

"No!" yelled Johnny, half-way through the gallery in search of Billy's clothes. When he emerged Cookie looked him over. "Ain't it funny, Kid, how a pipe'll stink up clothes?" he smiled. Johnny's retort was made over several yards of ground and when he had mounted Cookie yelled and waved him to return. When Johnny had obeyed and impatiently demanded the reason, Cookie pleasantly remarked: "Now, be shore and give her my love, Kid."

Johnny's reply covered half a mile of trail.

Johnny rode alertly through Perry's Bend, for Sheriff Nolan was no friend of his; and Nolan was not only a discarded suitor of Miss Joyce, but a warm personal friend of George Greener, the one rival Johnny feared. Greener was a widower as wealthy as he was unscrupulous, and a power on that range; when he said "jump" Nolan soared.

The Sheriff was standing before the Palace saloon when Johnny rode past, and he could not keep quiet. His comment was so judiciously chosen as to bring white spots on Johnny's flushed cheeks. The Bar-20 puncher was not famed for his self-control, and, wheeling in his saddle, he pointed a quivering forefinger at Mr. Nolan's badge of office, so conspicuously displayed: "Better men than you have lied behind a badge. Come down an' see me to-morrow without it," he invited.

Mr. Nolan flushed, hesitated, and walked away. To fight in defense of the law was his duty; but no sane man warred on the Bar-20 unless he must. One might censure Mr. Cassidy or Mr. Connors, or pick a fight with any of the rest of the outfit, except Johnny, and not get killed; but he must not harm their protégé. Mr. Nolan not only walked away but he sought the shadows and held communion with himself. If he could only get the pugnacious and very much spoiled Mr. Nelson to fracture some law!

Meanwhile, Johnny had reached the Joyce cottage, and was admitted by Miss Joyce herself.

"Good evening. You are late!" she chided, dimpling attractively.

He critically regarded the dimples, while he replied that he had paused to slay the sheriff but, knowing that it would cause him to lose more time, had postponed the event.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "You must not do that!"

"Well, of course not, if yo're agin it."

"But what did he do?"

"Mustn't tell. But do you really want him to live?"

"Why, of course! What a foolish question!"

"But why do you? Do you—like him?"

"I like everybody.

"Yes, an' everybody likes you, too," and his smile faded. "Do you like—him very much?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask foolish questions."

"Yes, I know. But do you?"

"I'll not say."

"Then you do."

"I don't think you're nice to-night," she pouted. "You're awfully jealous."

"Gee! I should think you'd want me to be jealous. I only wish you was jealous of me. Norah, I've just got to say it now, an'—"

"Yes, what did he do?" she cried eagerly.

"Who? Nolan?"

"Yes, yes; tell me."

"I don't mean him. I was going to tell you something that—"

"That you've done and now regret? Have you ever—ever killed a man?" she breathed.

"No; yes; lots of 'em," he confessed, remembering that she once had expressed admiration for brave and daring men. "Most half as many as Hopalong; an' I ain't near as old as him, neither."

"Oh, Mr. Cassidy! Won't you bring him up some evening?"

"Not me. I brought one friend up onct an' had to lick him to keep him away."

"Why, the idea! But Mr. Greener's like Mr. Cassidy. He's so brave, and a wonderful shot. He told me so."

"HUH! Told you! Well, well. Why he's a child; an' blinks when he shoots. Here—can he show a gun like mine?" and he held out his Colt, butt foremost so she could see the notches he

had cut that afternoon. A fleeting doubt went through his mind at what his outfit would say when it discovered said notches; the Bar-20 cut no notches; it liked to forget.

"Oh! Are they—are they?" she whispered, drawing back.

"They are. There is room for Nolan, an' his owner," he suggested.

"Norah! Can't you see! Don't you know how much I—"

"Yes, indeed! It must be awful to feel such remorse," he quickly interposed.

"Remorse nothin'! Them fellers deserved what they got!"

"And you a murderer! I never thought that of you," she rejoined.

"Why, Norah!" he cried in amazement.

"To think that you have human blood on—"

"Norah, Norah, listen; won't you?"

"—on your hands! How dare you call here!"

"But I tell you they were trying to get me! I had to."

"Is that true? You had to?"

"Shore. Think I kill men for fun, like Greener does?"

"Why, he doesn't do anything of the kind!" she retorted. "Didn't you just say he was a child, and blinked?"

"Yes, I did. But I didn't want you to think he was a murderer," he explained. Even Cookie would find it hard to get around that, he thought.

"How glad I am that he doesn't blink. I'd hate a man who was afraid to shoot."

"Well, how 'bout me?"

"But you've killed men, your brothers."

"Well—say—how can I kill without killin'?" he demanded, with exasperation. "Greener's killed 'em, too."

"Yes, but he doesn't blink!'

"Neither do I!'

"Yes; but you shoot to kill."

'Lord pity us—don't he?"

'Y-e-s, but that's different," she replied, smiling brightly.

Johnny looked around the room, his eyes finally resting on his hat.

"Yes, I see it's different. Greener can kill, an' blink! I can't. If he kills a man he's a hero; I'm a murderer. I kinda reckon he's got th' trail. But I love you, an' you've got to pick my trail—does it lead up or down?"

"Johnny Nelson! What are you saying?" she demanded, arising.

"Something turrible, mebby. I don't know; an' I don't care. It's true—so there you are. Norah, can't you see I do?" he pleaded, holding out his hands. "Won't you marry me?"

She looked down, her cheeks the color of fire, and Johnny continued hurriedly: "I've loved you a whole month. When I'm ridin' around I sort a' see you, an' hear you. Why, I talk to you lots when I'm alone. I've saved up some money, an' I had to work hard to save it, too. I've got some cows runnin' with our'n—in a little while I'll have a ranch of my own. Buck'll let me use th' east part of th' ranch, an' theres' a hill over there that'd look fine with a house on it. I can't wait no longer, Norah, I've got to know. Will you let me put this on yore finger?" He swiftly bent the kin into a ring and held it out eagerly: "Can I?"

She pushed him away and yielded to a sudden pricking of her conscience, speaking swiftly, as if forcing herself to do a disagreeable duty, and hating herself at the moment. "Johnny, I've been a—a flirt! When I saw you were beginning to care too much for me I should have stopped it; but I didn't. I amused myself—but I want you to believe one thing, to give me a little credit for just one thing: I never thought what it might mean to you. It was carelessness with me. But I was flirting, just the same—and it hurts to admit it. I'm not good enough for you, Johnny Nelson; it's hard to say, but it's true. Can you, will you forgive me?"

He choked and stepped forward holding out his hands imploringly, but she eluded him. When he saw the shame in her face, the tears in her eyes, he stopped and laughed gently: "But we can begin right, now, can't we? I don't care, not if you'll let me see you same as ever. You might get to care for me. And, anyhow, it ain't yore fault. I reckon it's me that's to blame."

At that moment he was nearer to victory than he had ever been; but he did not realize it and opportunity died when he failed to press his advantage.

"I am to blame," she said, so low he could hardly catch the words. When she continued it was with a rush: "I am not free—I haven't been for a week. I'm not free any more—and I've been leading you on!"

His face hardened, for now the meaning

of Greener's sneering laugh came to him, and a seething rage swept over him against the man who had won. He knew Greener, knew him well—the meanness of the man's nature, his cold cruelty; the many things to the man's discredit loomed up large against the frailty of the woman before him.

Norah stepped forward and laid a pleading hand on his arm, for she knew the mettle of the men who worked under Buck Peters: "What are you thinking? Tell me!"

"Why, I'm thinking what Nolan said. An', listen. You say you want me to forgive you? Well, I do, if there's anything to forgive. But I want you to promise me that if Greener don't treat you right you'll tell me."

"What do you mean?"

"Only what I said. Do you promise?"

"Perhaps you would better speak to him about it!" she said.

"I will—an' plain. But don't worry 'bout me. It was my fault for bein' a tenderfoot. I never played this game before, an' don't know th' cards. Good-bye."

HE rode away slowly, and made the rounds, and by the time he reached Lacey's he was so unsteady that he was refused a drink and told to go home. But he headed for the Palace instead, and when he stepped high over the doorsill Nolan was seated in a chair tipped back against one of the side ways, and behind the bar on the other side of the room Jed Terry drummed on the counter and expressed his views on local matters. The sheriff was listening in a bored way until he saw Johnny enter and head his way, feet high and chest out, and at that moment Nolan's interest in local affairs flashed up brightly.

Johnny lost no time: "Nolan," he said, rocking on his heels, "tell Greener I'll kill him if he marries that girl. He killed his first wife by abuse an' he don't kill no more. Savvy?"

The sheriff warily arose, for here was the opportunity he had sought. The threat to kill had a witness.

"An' if you open yore toad's mouth about her, like you did to-night, I'll kill you, too." The tones were dispassionate, the words deliberate.

"Hear that, Jed?" cried Nolan. "Nelson, yo're under ar—"

"Shut up!" snapped Johnny loudly, this time with feeling. It ain't healthy to slander women in this country. You lied to me to-night; don't lie again."

"I didn't. I said she was a flirt, an' she—"

The sheriff prided himself upon his quickness, but his gun was kicked from his hand before he knew what was coming; a chair glanced off Jed's face and wrapped the front window about itself in its passing, leaving the bartender in the throbbing darkness of interplanetary space; and as the sheriff opened his eyes and recovered from the hard swings his face had received, stopped, a galloping horse drummed southward toward the Bar-20; and the silence of the night was shattered by lusty war-whoops and a spurting .45.

When the sheriff and his posse called at the Bar-20, before breakfast the following morning they found a grouchy outfit and learned some facts.

"Where's Johnny?" repeated Hopalong, with a rising inflection. "Only wish I knowed!"

A murmur of wistful desire arose and Lanky Smith restlessly explained it: "He rampages in 'bout midnight an' wakes us up with his racket. When we asks him what he's doin' with our possessions he suggests we go to h—l. He takes his rifle, Pete's rifle, Buck's brand new canteen, 'bout eighty pounds of cartridges an' other useful duffle, all th' tobacco, an' blows away quick."

"On my cayuse," murmured Red.

"Wearin' my good clothes," added Billy, sorrowfully.

"An' my boots," sighed Hopalong.

"I ain't got no field glasses no more," grumbled Lanky.

'But he only got one laig of my new pants," chuckled Skinny. "I was too strong for him."

"He yanked my blanket off'n me, which makes me steal Red's," grinned Pete.

"Which you didn't keep very long!" retorted Red, with derision.

"Which makes us all peevish," plaintively muttered Buck.

"Now aint' it a h—l of a note?" laughed Cookie, loudly, forthwith getting scarce. He had nothing good enough to be taken.

"An' whichever was it run agin your face, sheriff?" sympathetically inquired Hopalong. "Mighty good thing it stopped," he added thoughtfully.

"Never mind my face," snorted the

peace officer hotly as his deputies smoothed out their grins. "I want to know where Nelson is, an' d—d quick! We'll search the house first."

"Hold on," responded Buck. "North of Salt Spring Creek yo're a sheriff; down here yo're nothin'. Don't search no house. He ain't here."

"How do I know he ain't?" snapped Nolan.

"My word's good; or there'll be another election stolen up in yore country," rejoined Buck ominously. "An' I wouldn't hunt him too hard, neither. We'll punish him."

Nolan wheeled and rode toward the hills without another word, his posse pressing close behind. When they entered Apache Pass one of them accidentally exploded his rifle, calling forth an angry tirade from the sheriff. Johnny heard it, and cared little for the warning from his friend Lucas; he waited and then rode down the rocky slope of the pass on the trail of the posse, squinting wickedly at the distant group as he caught glimpses of them now and again, and with no anxiety regarding backward glances. "Lot's wife'll have nothing on them if they look back," he muttered, fingering his rifle lovingly. At nightfall he watched them depart and grinned at the chase he would lead them when he returned.

BUT he did not see them again, although his friends reported that they were turning the range upside down to find him. One of his outfit rode out to him with supplies and information every few days and it was Pete who told him that six posses were in the hills.. "An' you can't leave, 'cause one of th' cordon would get you shore. I had a h—l of a time gettin' in to-day." Red reported that the sheriff had sworn to take him dead or alive. Then came the blow. The sheriff was at the point of death from lockjaw caused by complete paralysis of the cureafrend nerve just above the phrenic diaphragm, which Johnny had fractured. It was Hopalong who imparted this sad news, and withered Johnny's hope of returning tc a comfortable bunk house and square meals. So the fugitive clung to the hills, shunned sky-lines and wondered if the sheriff would recover before snow flew. He was hungry most of the time now because the outfit was getting stingy with the food supplies — and he dared not shoot any game.

Four weeks passed, weeks of hunger and nervous strain, and he was getting desperate. He had learned that Greener and his financeé were going down to Linnville soon, since Perry's bend had no parson; and his cup of bitterness, overflowing, drove him to risk an attempt to leave that part of the country. He had seen none of Pete's "cordon" although he had looked for them and he believed he could get away. So he rode cautiously down Apache Pass one noon, planning his route. The sand, washed down from the rock walls by the last rain, deadened all sounds of his progress, and as he turned a sharp bend he ran into Greener and Norah Joyce, not fifty feet away. They were laughing at how they had eluded and escaped the crowd of friends eager to accompany them—but the laughter froze when Johnny's gun swung up.

"'Nds up, Greener!" he snapped, viciously, remembering his promise to Nolan. "Miss Joyce, if you make trouble it'll cost him his life."

"Turned highwayman, eh?" sneered Greener, keenly alert for the necessary fraction of a second's carelessness on the part of the other.

"Miss Joyce, you will please ride along; I want to talk to him alone," Johnny requested.

"Yes, dear, that's best. I'll join you soon," urged Greener, flashing her a look she understood instinctively.

But Johnny was too wise to fall into the trap: "Don't get out of my sight, an' don't make no noise or signs; if you do he'll have to pay for it."

"You coward!" she cried angrily. "Coward!" and delivered an impromptu lecture that sent the blood surging into the fugitive's wan cheeks. But she obeyed, slowly, and when she was out of hearing Johnny spoke.

"Greener, yo're not going to marry her. You know what you are, you know how yore first wife died—an' I don't intend that Norah shall be abused as the other was. I'm a fugitive, hard pressed; I'm weak from want of food, and from hardships; all I have left is a slim chance of gettin' away. I've reached the point where I can't harm myself by shooting you, an' I'm goin' to do it rather than let any trouble come to her. But you'll get an even break, because I ain't never going to shoot a man

when he's helpless. Have you got anything to say?"

"Yes, yo're th' biggest fool I ever saw," replied Greener. "Yo're locoed through an' through; an' I'm goin' to take great pleasure in putting you away. But I want to thank you for one thing you did. You were drunk at the time an' may not remem- it. When you hit Nolan for talking like he did I liked you for it, an' I'm goin' to tell you so. Now we'll get at th' matter before us so I can move along."

Neither had paid any attention to Norah in the earnestness and keen-eyed scrutiny of each other and the first sign they had of her actions was when she threw her arms around Greener's neck and shielded him. He was too much of a man to fire from cover and Johnny realized it while the other tried to get her to leave the scene.

"I won't leave you to be murdered—I know what it means, I know it," she cried. "My place is here, and you can't deny your wife's first request! What will I do without you! Oh, dear, let me stay! I will stay! What woman ever had such a wedding day before! Dear, dear, what can I do? Tell me what to do!"

Johnny sniffled and wished the posse had taken him. This was a side he had never though of. His wife! Greener's wife! Then he was too late, and to go on ·oulc be a greater evil than the one he wished to eliminate. When she turned on him like a tigress and tore him to pieces word by word, tears rolling down her pallid cheeks and untold misery in her eyes, he shook his head and held up his hand.

"Greener, you win; I can't stop what's happened," he said slowly. "But I'll tell you this, an' I mean every word; if you don't treat her like she deserves, I'll come back some of these days and kill you shore. Nolan got his because he talked ill of her; an' you'll get yours if I die the next minute, if you ain't square with her."

"I don't need no instructions on how to treat my wife," retorted the other. "An' I'm beginnin' to see th' cause of your insanity, and it pardons you as nothing else will. Put up yore gun an' get back to th' ranch, where you belong—an' keep away from me. Savvy?"

"Not much danger of me gettin' in yore way," growled Johnny, "when I'm hunted like a dog for doing what any man would a' done. When the sheriff gets well, if he ever does, mebby I'll come back an' take my medicine. How was he, anyhow, when you left?"

"Dead tired, an' some under th' influence of liquor," replied Greener, a smile breaking over his frown. He knew the whole story well, as did the whole range, and he had laughed over it with the Bar-20 outfit.

"What's that? Ain't he near dead?" cried Johnny, amazed.

"Well, purty nigh dead of fatigue dancin' at our wedding last night; but I reckon he'll be driftin' home purty soon, all recovered." Greener suddenly gave way and roared with laughter. There was a large amount of humor in his makeup and it took possession of him, shaking him from head to foot. He had always liked Johnny, not because he ever wanted to but because no one could know the Bar-20 protégé and keep from it. This climax was too much for him, and his wife, recovering herself, caught the infection and joined in.

JOHNNY'S eyes were staring and his mouth wide open, but Greener's next words closed the eyes to a squint and snapped shut the open mouth.

"That there paralysis of th' cure-a-friend nerve didn't last; an' when I heard why you licked him I said a few words that made him a wiser man. He didn't hunt you after th' first day. Now you go an' shake han's with him. He knows he got what was coming to him so does everybody else know it. Go home an' quit playin' th' fool for th' whole range to laugh at."

Johnny stirred and came back to the scene before him. His face was livid with rage and he could not speak at first. Finally, however, he mastered himself and looked up: "I'm cured, all right, but they ain't! Wait till my turn comes! What a fool I was to believe 'em; but they usually tell th' truth. 'Cure-a-friend nerve'! They'll pay me dollar for cent before I'm finished!" He caught the sparkle of his diamond pin, the pin he had won, when drunk, at El Paso, and a sickly grin flickered over the black frown. "I'm a little late, I reckon; but I'd like to give th' bride a present to show there ain't no hard feelin's on my part, an' to bring her luck. This here pin ain't no fit ornament for a fool like me, so if it's all right, I'll be plumb tickled to see her have it. How 'bout it, Greener?"

The happy pair exchanged glances and Mrs. Greener, hesitating and blushing ac-

cepted the gift: "You can bend it into a ring easy." Johnny hastily remarked.

Greener extend his hand: "I reckon we can be friends, at that, Nelson. You squared up with me when you licked Nolan. Come up and see us when you can."

Johnny thanked him and shook hands and then watched them ride slowly down the cañon, hand in hand, happy as little children. He sat silently, lost in thought, his anger rising by leaps and bounds against the men who had kept him on the anxious seat for a month. Straightening up suddenly, he tore off the navy blue necktie and, hurling it from him, fell into another reverie, staring at the cañon wall, but seeing in his mind's eye the outfit planning his punishment; and his eyes grew redder and redder with fury. But it was a long way home and his temper cooled as he rode; that is why no one knew of his return until they saw him asleep in his bunk when they awakened at daylight the following morning. And no one ever asked about the diamond, or made any explanations—for some things are better unmentioned. But they paid for it all before Johnny considered the matter closed.

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NEXT DOOR TO HELL

By Alan M. Emley

THE captain of the guard stopped Blin Bradley, cowpuncher and late placer miner, on the outskirts of Cuchara. *El Capitan* was courteous.

"I am desolated, *Señor,*" he explained in broken English, "but His Excellency, the governor, has given strict commands that the *Señor* Bradley is not to enter Cuchara. It is feared that the peace and tranquillity of our beloved city might be interrupted if the *Señor* were to do us the honor of paying us another visit.

The captain smiled and then continued in his persuasive voice.

"You understand, *Señor.* A thousand pardons, but you comprehend that His Excellency's fears are not entirely ungrounded."

Blin grinned unhappily, pulled off his huge Mexican *sombrero* and mopped a perspiring brow. It was a very hot day. His good-humored, rugged face, tanned almost to the swarthiness of that of the captain of the guard, was clean and newly shaved. He had anticipated a pleasant hour in the cool of a Cuchara *cantina* before going onward in his search for the man who had betrayed and robbed him.

"Yeah," he agreed, "if I remember correct, I did have a little run-in with the old boy the last time I was here. I hope his whiskers growed out again all right. I only meant to singe 'em a little to chase out the cockroaches an' moths. I didn't know he had 'em all smeared up with inflammable grease."

His keen, blue eyes rested contemplatively on the four guards who stood at attention in the middle of the road. As though divining his thought, the officer smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I have sixty men in the town, *Señor*. While none of them is to be compared as a marksman with the *Señor* Bradley, of whose wonderful skill we have been, alas, the unfortunate witnesses, yet you comprehend that sixty men firing a volley—"

The cowboy's grin widened.

"Yeah, I get yuh, Captain. One of 'em might accidentally hit me."

"*Si, Señor,* it would be most regrettable."

"All right, *amigo,* yuh can tell Old Whiskerino he can take his *siesta* in peace. The *Señor* Bradley is headin' toward the border if he don't head for some other place."

The cowboy touched the sweat-streaked, tough-looking pinto with a spur, and turned to ride around the town.

"A thousand thanks for your courtesy," the captain called. "Give my regards to your friend, *Señor* Archeluto."

Blin frowned. He intended to give *Señor* Archeluto something besides the captain's regards when he found him, for the *Señor* Archeluto had gone north with a sizable bag of gold dust and nuggets for which Blin Bradley had put in four months of back-breaking labor in an ancient streambed in the hills.

The cowboy was hurt deeper down than he cared to acknowledge when he learned that Juan had not shown up at the town where he had gone to ship the gold. A *vaquero* reported that he had been seen near La Veta, that cess-pool of humanity a few miles south of the border.

Blin had gone through hell for Juan Archeluto. He was attracted to the gentlemanly, soft-spoken Mexican *caballero* because Juan was everything that Blin was not. The cowboy had found in the carefully-reared *caballero* all the education, refinement and gentle courtesy that he himself lacked. Juan had admired the strength and the devil-may-care outlook upon life of the hard-riding, quick-shooting American. The two had been saddle-mates nearly a year, and had called each other by one of the most sacred of all names: *friend.*

Blin's frown deepened as he rode over the rolling, rough hills that were eloquent with the desolation of a desert land.

"Friend, hell!" he muttered. "I ain't got no friends, an' I never will have again. Damn everybody!"

IT was inconceivable that Juan had betrayed him.

An hour later he approached La Veta. No one would request him to ride around this little-pest-hole, the headquarters of the American renegade, Mark Reeves. The dope-runners and female outcasts that inhabited the village welcomed anyone who had money. The *vaqueros* had a name for the place: "Next door to hell!" Blin had been here once before, and he knew he would have to watch his step in La Veta.

On the edge of the town was a doorless, windowless ruin of an *adobe* shack. Passing it, Blin turned suddenly as he heard a familiar voice.

"Help, help," it called in Spanish. "For the love of Christ, help!"

Spurring forward, the cowboy rode round the house. What he saw made him pull up short and set his lips in a grim line.

Juan Archeluto was lying there on the ground, a smear of blood across his forehead. His right arm was broken and dangling helpless at his side. He was tied with a raw-hide thong around his ankle, and the thong was fastened to a post at the corner of the house. Nearby was a red-ant hill, and the vicious insects already were swarming toward him.

"Help, *Señor,*" he murmured. For the love of—Ah, *Madre de Dios,* it is you, *amigo.* My friend, you have come in answer to my prayers to the Blessed Virgin."

The cowboy sprang from his pinto and slashed the thong. Gone were his anger and bitterness at the sight of the suffering of Juan, with whom he had eaten and slept and labored since the two had been thrown together a year before in the strangest of all midnight adventures.

The *caballero* sank back and closed his eyes.

"Juan," gritted the cowboy, "who did it?"

"It was—it was the *gringo,* Mark Reeves," he gasped. "They stole the gold, my friend, and I—I—but I cannot tell you now. I thank the Blessed Virgin that you have arrived, for I am not yet ready to die. I have work to do."

"Yeah," Blin answered gently, "I understand Juan. I, too, thank your Blessed Virgin that I came in time."

Carefully he lifted the *caballero* and carried him into the ruin of a hut. Tiny lizards flashed out of the way. A scorpion lifted its tail sullenly and stalked into a crack in the wall.

Neither of the men saw a barefooted *peon* rise out of a clump of mesquite and slip away toward the village. Mark Reeves had left a spy to watch the dying agony of Juan.

Gently the cowboy laid the wounded man on the floor and cut away the blood-soaked sleeve. A red stream was oozing from a wound above the elbow that had smashed the bone. Blin bound it carefully with a sterile bandage that he carried for such emergencies. He did not attempt to improvise splints, but bound the arm close to the *caballero's* side. The wound in the head was superficial and required but little attention.

Mark Reeves! Blin had heard many wild tales of this American renegade and his Mexican outlaws.

Cattle-rustler, dope-runner, bandit, he had harried the border and the ranches with a ruthless hand. So far, the soldiers of the governor had been unable to bring him to the gallows he so richly deserved. It was rumored in certain places that his immunity was because of a fair division of the spoils with His Excellency, the governor, which was not at all improbable.

The cowboy knelt by Juan's side and poured water from a canteen through the parched lips.

"As soon as yuh feel able to ride, we'll go back to Cuchara. The doctor there will fix yuh all up. Just now all yuh got to do is keep cool an' don't fret. The big danger is fever, yuh know."

"I do not want to ride now, *amigo,*" came the soft answer. "I want to lie here, for I am sick and faint. I have not your rugged indifference to pain, and am but a weakling. The gold is lost to us, Blin. Mark Reeves has it in his *cantina.*"

The cowboy set his lips in a grim line.

"Mebbe that damned renegade will have another guess comin'," he gritted. "Keep cool, Juan, an' don't fret. As soon as the sun goes down a little yuh'll feel better, and then we'll take the back trail for Cuchara and the doctor. In the meantime, I'll pay this Reeves *hombre* a little visit that mebbe he won't like.

The young Mexican looked adoringly at the cowboy.

You come like an angel of mercy, *amigo,*" he murmured. You—you remember my little sister—and the bandit I told you about?"

"I sure do, Juan." There was a marked tenderness in the cowboy's voice as he spoke. "Yeah, I know all about it, and I know yuh-ve been lookin' for that man a long time."

"She was a lovely girl, Blin. I wish you could have known her. She was just out of the convent when the bandits captured our ranch and this man took her. I was bound and helpless. She—she died, *amigo,* after they had finished with her. Even Padre Francisco, gentle man of God that he is, swore a great oath when we found her."

"Yeah, I understand, Juan," Blin soothed. "Don't think about it now. We'll find the skunk some day, and then yuh can settle with him in yore own way."

"I found him today, my friend. He is this Mark Reeves. I went into the *cantina* after him, but he was too strong for me. I have not your strength, and your lightning speed with a gun."

IN the *cantina,* word had been brought by the peon spy, Garcia, that a *gringo caballero* had set the victim free.

Mark Reeves, tall, broad, powerful, red-eyed and unshaved, stood in his shirt sleeves before the bar.

"This *Americano* will come down the street," he told the five men and two women who were in the room. "We will bring him in here, for he is a dangerous enemy. He is the friend of Juan Archeluto, and I have heard much of him. You, Rosita, prepare to scream when he comes. He is the kind of fool that will run to a woman's aid when she screams. Lopez, stand by the door with your knife. Mind, you are not throwing at this *Americano.* You are throwing at the image painted on the wall. He comes through the door and

—Pouff! It is too bad! You others stand by the bar. Be ready to shoot if Lopez should miss. We will kill this *Americano* or he will cause trouble over the gold."

"He is riding this way," came the gutteral voice of the *peon*, Garcia.

Through the dirty windows they could see the tough-looking pinto trotting slowly forward. Blin Bradley was gracefully forking the saddle. The cowboy was coming straight toward the *cantina*.

"Now!" Reeves exclaimed. "Scream, Rosita!"

The girl was an olive-skinned, soft-eyed creature of not more than sixteen years. Shortly her charms would fade away, and she would be old, wrinkled and a grandmother at thirty-five. But now a flash of youth and beauty was hers, and men desired her. For a moment she stood looking through the window.

"*Señor!*" she whispered. "He is handsome, this American. Please do not make me bring him to his death—like—like Stephano."

"*Carramba!*" cried the renegade. "You would fail me now? Scream, damn you, or I'll throttle you."

"*Señor*, I cannot!"

Like a tiger the huge bulk of Reeves leapt forward. He seized the girl by the throat and jerked her from side to side. His red eyes narrowed to mere slits in his face, and his teeth were bared in a vicious snarl.

"Double-cross me, will you, you rat?" he raged.

"*Señor!*"

It was a cry from the *peon*, Garcia, who started forward with terror written in his eyes.

"*Señor! Por Dios*, pity! She is my daughter and she is with child. You know, *Señor*, you promised to marry her. You promised before the *santo* of The Virgin."

The *peon* caught hold of the arm of the renegade. A blow of the huge fist caught him squarely in the face, and he went reeling into a corner.

The shriek of the girl rang out on the still, dead air of afternoon, and it was not an assumed cry to draw the cowboy into the trap. It was the piercing, agonized scream of a woman in fear of her life.

Through the window they saw the pinto throw up its head. Blin Bradley vaulted out of the saddle, and came dashing toward the door of the *cantina*.

Lopez whipped back his hand, and the long knife glittered for the death throw. Mark Reeves threw the girl to the floor, and stepped back against the wall. The three Mexicans crouched by the bar with guns drawn.

They were ready for Blin Bradley, the *Americano* who would give trouble over the gold.

They were not ready, however, for the smashing entrance of the hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle that catapulted through the door like an enraged bull. Gun in hand, so fast did the cowboy move that Lopez was caught off guard. The knife flashed through the air fully two feet behind Blin. It struck the wall and remained there quivering.

A gun roared, and plaster was kicked from the wall within a few inches of the cowboy's head. He threw a bullet at the Mexican who had fired. The man went down clutching his stomach. The others dropped their weapons and held their hands high. This *gringo* must be the devil in disguise!

Then Reeves came into the fray. With a bellow he hurtled forward, a .44 appearing in his huge fist.

Again Blin's gun roared. The weapon of the outlaw shot from his fingers and struck the floor. He paused and stared at a hand which began to drip red where it was grooved by the bullet.

"You *borrachon!*" he gritted. "You have done this to me?"

"I ought to have made it the heart, yuh damned reptile," Blin answered calmly, "but I couldn't do it. Yuh belong to Juan Acheluto, and I ain't got the right to take yuh away from him."

WITH a few forceful words in Spanish, of which the Padre Francisco would not have approved, Blin lined the four men against the bar. The wide-eyed girl remained sitting on the floor where Reeves had thrown her. She was sobbing softly. The cowboy did not see Garcia, who remained motionless in the dark corner of the *cantina*.

"I came here for that gold Reeves," the cowboy announced grimly. "In two minutes I'm going to begin shooting. First I'll notch yore ears, an' then take off the ends o' yore nose, an' then—"

"It will not be necessary," answered the outlaw. "I know when I'm licked. If

any of these damned greasers was worth a cuss! But they ain't. Your gold is in here, Mister, locked up in the desk."

He motioned toward an adjoining room, the door of which stood open.

Blin marched the four men ahead of him. The room was fitted up as an office, with a high, roll-top desk standing against the wall. There was no other furniture except a box filled with sawdust and three or four sag-bottomed cane chairs.

"Don't make a false move, any of yuh," the cowboy cautioned, " 'cause this here cannon is just itchin' to exterminate a few pole-cats. Bring out that gold, Reeves, an' lay it on the table. Be sure yuh don't grab a gun out o' the drawer. I'll be watchin'."

Blin stood, back to the door, menacing the four men with his gun.

Reeves turned to the desk and opened the middle drawer with a key. He moved slowly, for he had seen what the cowboy had not: the barefooted Garcia creeping through the door with a glittering *machete* in his hand.

"It's all here, Mister."

Reeves drew a long, thin, canvas bag from the drawer. He lifted it as though it were very heavy.

A sixth sense seemed to warn the cowboy of the approaching danger. He turned just as the *machete* came down, the flat side of the blade catching him fairly on the head.

Without a sound he crumpled to the floor.

The face of Mark Reeves leered above him as Blin struggled back to consciousness. The sunlight was filtering through a barred window, and he found he was lying on a stone floor.

"This is an old *cuartel,* Mister," came the mocking voice of Reeves. "It ain't been used for years, but I had a lock put on the door, and it'll serve its purpose once more. We will go away and leave you to your thoughts. I have put you and your friend together. It is better than feeding him to the ants, for you will die of thirst. I am leaving your gun with one load in the cylinder. It will be interesting to know which one of you will use it to kill the other so that he may drink his blood. I will come and look in at the window from time to time. It will be as good as a play."

With a laugh that was not pleasant to hear, the renegade went out and slammed the heavy, plank door.

Blin sat up and looked about him. Seated with his back to the wall, a smile on his thin, sensitive face, was Juan. He laughed softly as the cowboy felt of a huge lump on his head.

"My friend, I am sorry," he said. "I should have let you take me to the doctor in Cuchara."

"Yeah, I sure balled things up, Juan. This here Mark Reeves is a nice little playmate."

"Yes, my friend, when a man of a civilized race turns savage, he is—" The *caballero* gestured with his free hand.

"Yeah, I know, Juan. He's a danged sight worse than the savages themselves. The question is, what are we goin' to do about it?"

"We can break out the bars of the window."

Juan's tone was so positive that the cowboy did not laugh.

"How do yuh mean, we can break 'em out?" Blin asked. "They look like oak bars to me, hard as boiler iron."

Juan answered: "You have the little glass you use to light the fires when we run short of matches."

In an inner pocket Blin had long carried a magnifying glass, small but powerful, to use when he was far from civilization.

"I'll be doggoned," he murmured. "Mebbe yo're right."

The sun was streaming into the old *cuartel,* making a great patch of barred light on the stone floor. The window was high, and hardly two feet square.

Blin could see out of it by standing on tiptoes.

"Yeah," he said as though speaking to himself, "I guess the boy is correct. We'll be out o' here in jig time. How are yuh feelin', Juan?"

"I am very well, *amigo.* The sickness I felt after being wounded is gone. When they brought you here I thought you were dead, you lay so silent on the floor. I wanted to live only to avenge you—and my sister. Now I am well because you are alive. Together we will live to hang this Reeves by the neck until he is dead."

Blin drew out the small glass. He held it with the bright spot of refracted light falling on the bottom of one of the bars. It seemed scarcely a moment before a tiny wisp of smoke curled up. Presently the dry wood broke into a flame.

The cowboy nursed it tenderly. Occasionally he blew it out and scraped away the charred wood, and then started it again. A deep notch was burned nearly through the bar. He repeated the process at the top, and with the other two bars that stood across the window.

"I can yank 'em out any time now, Juan," he said at last. "Whenever yo're ready, we'll go out of here. And about that gold, so far as I'm concerned I don't give a dang about it. It's the adventure that appeals to me. I like goin' after gold when it's hid away in the hills. When I get it, the adventure is all over an' I lose interest.

"I know, my friend," the *caballero* answered softly, "and I, too, cared for it only that it might help me find the murderer of my sister. I felt that it would help me, and it did. It led me to him, and now its purpose has been served."

"All right, old top. If we sneak out of here in the daylight, they'll see us sure. We'll wait till dark and then find our horses an' hit the trail for Cuchara. Mebbe they'll let me go in if I prove to 'em that all I want is a doctor."

SLOWLY the blazing Mexican sun dipped down behind the jagged hills that were splashed with the harsh green of prickly-pear and *suhuaro* cacti. The deep, confusing twilight settled over the earth as Blin broke the bars and squirmed out through the window. It was not an easy task. The difficulty was increased by the sharp stumps of the oak bars. The cowboy realized suddenly that Juan, with one broken and helpless arm, could not get through that window.

"Wait a minute, Juan," he cautioned. "I want to look around."

He slipped around the *cuartel* to the door. It was locked with a huge, iron padlock that nothing could touch short of a file or a jimmy. He had heard of shooting a lock, but he thought a bullet could do no more than dent this one. Anyway, he didn't want to shoot. He had only one shell in the gun that Reeves had left him as part of the renegade's torture scheme.

"Juan," he called softly. "I've gotta get that key. I'll be back before long."

Then he made his way toward the *cantina* through the gathering gloom.

Mark Reeves was sitting at his desk figuring with the stub of a pencil. The window was open, but the shade was drawn so that prying eyes could not see what Reeves was doing. Before him was the long, thin bag of heavy canvas. The swarthy Lopez, with his knife in his boot, was sitting on one of the sag-bottomed chairs smoking a long, thin cigarette.

"There's three hundred and seventy-two ounces of gold in this bag, Lopez," the outlaw chief was saying. "The way I figger, it's worth almost six thousand bucks; a nice little haul for you and me. The others will get only day wages, of course."

There was a timid knock at the door. Reeves frowned and shoved the bag into a pile of papers.

"Come in," he growled.

The *peon,* Garcia, entered silently followed by the soft-eyed Rosita. Reeves glared at them. He did not want to be disturbed, especially by these two.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked harshly.

"Señor!" The man cringed before the venomous glare of his master. "I—I served you well today, did I not, when I —when I vanquished the *gringo* who would have robbed you?"

"It would have been better if you had used the edge of the *machete,* Garcia. Otherwise it was well. What about it?"

Reeves was working himself into a passion, for he suspected what was coming.

"Señor, it is my daughter."

Reeves sprang to his feet with a curse, and the *peon* cringed like a whipped cur.

"She is only a baby, *Señor,"* he cried, "and you promised to marry her. Will you do so tonight?"

Reeves looked at the quailing figure of the man before him, and burst into a laugh.

"Marry your slut of a daughter?" he cried in English. "No, not tonight or any other night."

Then he spoke to the *peon* in his native tongue.

"I was drunk, Garcia, if I made you such a promise. Take your daughter and go away from La Veta. Don't ever come back or it will mean death on the ant hill. I am through with both of you: I need you no longer."

"Señor!"

The *peon* drew himself erect and there was a new light in his eyes, and a new ring to his voice.

"You do this to me and Rosita?"

"Get out!" Reeves snarled. "Get out and don't come back."

"Carramba!" The voice was low with the hissing quality of the snake. *"Señor,* I am a Garcia, and will get revenge."

"Oh. you will!" Reeves' tone was as cold as tempered steel. "You want revenge, do you? All right, take it!"

His fist smashed full into Garcia's face. The scream of the girl rang out as her father fell. Ignoring her, the renegade stepped forward and kicked the prostrate form into the corner.

"Here's your revenge, you damned Indian," he gritted.

The girl's cry of agony again pierced the stillness of the tropical night. Lopez grinned and puffed his cigarette.

The curtain over the window suddenly fell with a ripping sound, and Blin Bradley sprang into the room.

Gun in hand he stood, his blue eyes boring into the face of Mark Reeves.

"Yuh damned snake!" he snapped, "say yore prayers!"

Lopez sprang to his feet and his hand flashed downward to his boot.

"Señor!" The cry came from the girl.

Blin turned with the speed of the striking serpent.

Spang!

The bullet took Lopez fairly between the eyes. The knife flew wide and was buried in the wall. The outlaw pitched forward to the floor.

The cowboy's gun swept back and centered just above the renegade's belt buckle. There was no terror in Reeve's eyes.

"You forget, Mister," he purred, "that there is only one bullet in that gun."

The pearl-handled .44 appeared in his hand. Blin sprang forward as the renegade's weapon barked out its message of death. His own gun came down on the outstretched hand and the bullet splintered into the floor.

THE cowboy moved with the speed of the tiger, but, as Reeves' gun flew from his hand, his left fist shot up straight into Blin's jaw. A million stars seemed to flash about the room, and the cowboy gasped for breath as the huge arms caught him in a crushing hug.

Blin was a master of the art of a rough-and-tumble fight, but in this test of sheer strength, he was no match for the powerful outlaw. Slowly he was bent backward. Desperately he struggled to keep his feet. He struck out with short jabs. Again and again his fist smashed into the face before him, but he was off balance and his blows lacked the power to hurt.

The door swung back, and dark faces were framed in the opening.

"Get out!" Reeves snarled. "This is my killing."

His voice held the confidence of the victor. The faces disappeared, and the door closed.

The girl was cringing in a corner of the room. Garcia, lying prone on the floor, looked out with glittering eyes at this struggle that could have only one end.

The big hand of the outlaw came up and grasped Blin's throat. The cowboy, with a desperate heave, threw himself sideways, and for a moment the hold was broken. But again that terrible fist shot out. Blin sagged forward, his fists flying, and again Reeves rushed into a clinch.

With fists, feet and head the cowboy struck, kicked and butted, but the great barrel of a body before him seemed as hard as iron. Blin knew he was fighting a losing battle.

Again the relentless hand closed on his throat. The cowboy was shoved backwards. Strange, colored lights were whirling about the room, and a singing came into his ears.

He caught sight of the long, canvas bag lying among the papers on the table, and he thought of Juan sitting helpless in the old *cuartel.* It was the gold that had been Blin's undoing. It was the gold that had caused Juan to betray him. It had brought the cowboy to this pest-hole in the hills; to La Veta—next door to hell!

With a mighty wrench he again broke the hold and stepped back. Reeves roared aloud as he sprang upon him. The cowboy's fists shot into the contorted face. Then the renegade had him by the throat, again pressing him backwards.

Blin's struggles grew feeble. He gasped for breath. He jabbed the face before him, but he knew there was no strength in his punches. The lights were fading away. It was growing dark. A voice seemed to be calling something to him, but he could not understand. Perhaps Juan—

He fell in a limp heap on the floor, and lay looking up at the vague features of the outlaw chief. A red fog seemed to sweep

down around him, and he felt that he was floating upward into the sky.

A harsh laugh brought him back to the earth. Slowly his vision cleared.

Reeves was standing above him. The outlaw had picked up his pearl-handled .44 and was pointing it straight at Blin's face. He was leering at the cowboy with his battered eye. He had the face of a demon! Next door to hell—

"So this is the great Blin Bradley that twice took Juan Archeluto out of the place I prepared for him," the outlaw gloated. "You would make an enemy of Mark Reeves, would you? I might prepare a nice little exercise for you, where my *hombrecitos* would pull out your toe nails and turn you barefooted into the desert, but I choose to kill you myself—now. See! Shall I count ten and then shoot. Between the eyes you shall have it, as you killed Lopez."

The red fog again crept slowly down around the distorted face of the outlaw. His voice seemed to be coming from a great distance. Blin wanted to rise, but he was tired and faint and did not care. He heard the count come slowly from far away.

"Four, five, six—" he heard, and then the voice surged out stronger.

Behind Reeves another form loomed, and the bloody visage of the *peon,* Garcia, appeared out of the red fog. Closer it came. Blin wondered if he were dreaming.

"Seven, eight—"

The teeth of the renegade were drawn back in a snarl. He spat out the count with all the viciousness of a man who loves to torture and to kill.

"Nine—"

There was a dull sound, like that of a meat-cleaver on the chopping block.

The awful vision of a face divided in half appeared in the red fog, and Blin knew that Reeves would torture and kill no more.

"Thou are avenged, my Rosita," a voice spoke brokenly.

The fog slowly cleared, and Blin sat up. Garcia was helping the sobbing girl through the window, and the two disappeared in the darkness.

The cowboy struggled to his feet and looked about him. He shuddered at the object on the floor. Next door to hell! But he must have the keys!

His eyes caught sight of the canvas bag on the desk. Mechanically he picked it up, and a moment later stepped out into the night.

As though in a dream he found the two saddled horses, and led them up before the *cuartel.* The key grated in the lock, and he helped Juan out of the prison and onto the horse. Briefly he explained what had taken place.

SILENTLY they rode away toward Cuchara, where a doctor would set Juan's broken arm and put soothing lotions on the battered face of the cowboy.

"The gold, Juan," Blin said softly. "I recovered it. Take it, my friend. You wanted it badly or you never would have brought it here."

"I brought it here?" There was surprise in the voice of the *caballero.* "Did you not know, my friend? Reeves and his men caught me on the road to town where I was going to ship it to the mint. I followed them here to retake it from them. I could not come back to you and tell you that, in my weakness, I had failed. I do not want the gold, *amigo.* Mark Reeves is dead, and I will return to my home. You will go with me, and we will do what you call *punch the cows* together."

Under his breath the cowboy cursed himself for doubting the friend at his side. Ahead were two vague forms walking along the road. They were Garcia and the soft-eyed Rosita.

Blin pulled up as they came to the *peon* and his daughter.

"Here, friend," he said as he pressed a long, thin bag into the man's hands. "It is for Rosita. And you, also, can buy yourself another *machete* for the one you left back there in the *cantina. Adios,* old *borrechon,* and good luck!"

The two friends rode onward into the night.

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ALONE figure jogged along the dusty road and turned the corner of what had been the "Last Chance Saloon" into the still dustier street of Mud Flats. A tight lipped grievance sat heavily on his lean, tanned, young face, and gleamed in his gray eyes. His horse turned without guidance from the reins.

Halfway down that single street of the town, from the boardwalk that ran along in front of the familiar rows of buildings, a man hailed him.

"Hey, Tom!"

He turned his horse toward the voice and eyed the squat, slightly bowlegged figure of Jud Perkins.

"Tom, yuh'd better git back outa town and stay out fer a few days!" Jud's blue eyes gazed into Tom's gray ones.

"Hunh!" Tom adjusted the coils of his riata, hanging from the saddle horn, lifted a leg and foot backward over his horse's rump and stepped to the ground. "Whadda yuh mean?" he demanded.

"It—it ain't goin' ter be healthy fer yuh here today!" Jud's eyes shifted away from Tom's direct gaze.

Tom raised an arm in an upright gesture to let his bridle slide down along his forearm into the crook of his elbow. His eyes narrowed to mere slits as he bent the full force of them upon Jud.

"Has—has Slim McAllister been talking again?"

"He's allus talkin', Tom, but he's a killer, too. Sometime when you're not expectin' he's goin' ter beat yuh to your gun! Today would be a good time for him to do it!"

Tom laughed. One hand moved in an instinctive gesture toward the holster at his hip.

"He had a chance to do it once and he didn't," Tom reminded Jud. "I'm still waiting for him to pull a gun!"

"That was different, Tom. This here town was fed up on killin's then. It won't be like that today."

"I can go for my gun just as fast today as I could then. Barking dogs don't bite, Jud!" He turned toward the hitching rack a few feet down the street.

Jud followed. Tom could sense the tension in Jud's mind. It wasn't like the stocky, bowlegged buckaroo to be upset over some loose talk by McAllister.

"Public opinion's against yer today, Tom." Jud warned, and Tom could read the seriousness that lay behind Jud's blue eyes. "Everybody's thinkin' you done it!"

Tom swung swiftly on him.

"Quit talking spiggoty! Talk sense! What's everybody thinking I've done?"

"Robbed the bank! Yesterday evening! There was two of them! One was about your build!"

"Hell—I—I—" His voice trailed off as he remembered words he had spoken the day before, words spoken in the office of the cashier of the bank to the cashier himself: "You told me a month ago that my money'd be just as safe here as with the Government itself. Now you're telling me I can't get any of it today and can get only part of it when this money you've got coming in gets here!" His gaze had wandered to a cage beyond the cashier. There had been piles of greenbacks in that cage. Vaguely, he had recognized that there must have been something crooked in the management of that bank.

"For two cents of that money I put in here, I'd take my six-gun and get it out with some interest!" he had told the cashier grimly.

His eyes were grave as they came back to Jud.

"You see, you talked too much when you was in the bank yesterday," Jud told him. "Course—me, I wouldn't blame you much if you had done it. Everybody knows Peters lent too much of the bank's money to McAllister and couldn't get it back!"

"I didn't do it, Jud! For a few minutes, I felt like it, but I didn't do it!"

Jud dug in the dust of the street with a toe of his boot.

"I know you didn't, Tom. But that

money they got in yesterday was what they was going to pay off the depositors with after they'd got 'em to sign up to take just part of their money."

Tom nodded gravely.

"And of course now it's all gone, the blame's shifted from Peters and McAllister to me," he admitted.

His gray eyes were serious. Folks would forget the money they had been skinned out of legally. They would remember only it was their money taken from the bank at the point of a gun.

"You see what I mean, Tom? You oughta go back to the Lazy S and stay there till this kinda blows over," Jud argued.

"Hell, let's go get a drink." Tom turned toward the Red Steer saloon.

JUD clutched at his arm.

"Don't be a damn fool, Tom! They'll be just plumb, plain poison in there for you! You know McAllister's been itching for a chance to draw on you. If he does it today and gets you, it'll be a killing, but if you beat him to the draw it'll be murder! It's a kind of heads he wins, tails you lose proposition!"

Tom's gaze flicked the length of the street. Men were standing about, knotted into little groups of twos and threes. He knew they were watching him with unfriendly glances. His gray eyes when they came back to Jud were as devoid of fear as the sultry air was of snow. People talked a lot. Everyone in town knew he was suspected now.

"Let's wet our throats," he remarked to Jud.

Jud followed him unwillingly. Tom kicked open the swinging door of the saloon upon a distinct air of hostility inside. Men's heads jerked up from card games to stare at him with unfriendly glances. Others set glasses slowly back on tables. A dozen hands moved toward guns. And stopped before the movements were half completed. No man wanted to be the first to pull his gun. Tom's cold gray eyes were dangerous as dynamite.

For a long moment, he stood there, his tall, tapering form towering above Jud who had kicked open the other swinging door to stand beside him. His left arm hung loosely away from his body. His feet were spread wide apart. His right thumb was pushed down under his belt, leaving his hand only inches away from the butt of his gun in its holster. His eyes ranged with the flickering speed of a lariat from one man to another. He nodded shortly. Then he was striding to the bar with Jud close behind.

"Two shots of hard liquor!" Tom flung at the barkeeper. "And we'll take it straight!"

Hostility was, Tom knew, as he lifted his glass to his lips, so thick in the air behind him that it could almost be sliced with a knife, like steaks cut from a critter killed for beef. The fiery liquid went down his throat in a single gulp. He wiped his lips with a large bandana and turned slowly back to the room. His elbows came up easily to rest on the bar. One heel lifted to hang itself over the rail. His eyes had narrowed to mere slits. Otherwise there was no sign from him to show that he saw the .45 which Slim McAllister had pointed at his heart.

"Keys, you've got the gall of a brass faced monkey, coming back here today!" McAllister's dark, oily face was sleek with satisfaction.

"What're you trying to do, Slim? Start a gun fight?"

"I'm going to hold you till the sheriff comes! If you start for your gun, you'll get lead poisoning before you reach it!"

Tom grinned.

"If the sheriff wants, me, I been standing out there in the street," he observed. "And I ain't aiming to leave town today, so I reckon you're just going to a plumb lot of trouble!"

McAllister nodded.

"You're right, Keys," he agreed. "You ain't leaving town today unless you leave feet first in a wagon!"

Tom's grin broadened into a laugh.

"Put up your gun, Slim. I know you was hoping I'd give you a chance to kill me when I turned around. But I ain't drawing on you today. So go ahead and send for the sheriff if that's what you're waiting on."

There was a little murmur of assent from men in the room. Tom knew it represented the undercurrent of dislike for Slim McAllister that existed in their minds. Yet he knew, too, that today they would sanction the killing of Tom Keys by almost anyone. The tension in the room was like a thin wire drawn tight, a wire with a pair of wire clippers poised to cut it apart.

"Shorty," Jones rose from a table near the door.

"I'll get the sheriff," he promised.

The tension relaxed slightly as his short figure disappeared through the doors into the street. The danger of blazing guns seemed to subside momentarily as McAllister, recognizing the force of public opinion supporting law and order, holstered his gun. Tom continued to survey the room through heavy-lidded, dangerous eyes. Beside him, Jud Perkins leaned against the bar and strove to achieve Tom's air of nonchalance.

Shorty Jones came back with the sheriff. Tom's gray eyes met those of the sheriff calmly. The sheriff would be fair. There wasn't an ounce of anything but square dealing in the sheriff's tall, lean, grizzled makeup.

"Son, you're wanted," he told Tom good naturedly. "I reckon you better hand me your gun!"

"Sheriff, I don't reckon you want to take my gun!" Tom's tall form stiffened against the bar. "I'm aiming to make bond!" He turned slowly to Jud beside him. "Jud, you run down the street and tell Sye Hoskins I want him to sign a bond for me."

Jud moved toward the door.

"Son, I'm still thinking that you better let me keep your gun for you." The sheriff moved a step nearer Tom.

"Bob"— Abruptly Tom dropped the sheriff title and used his name—"there's already been some gun play here. I'm willing to give you my gun if all of 'em will do the same." His hand flicked with a little gesture to include the others present.

"Sheriff, if you need some help to get that gun—" Slim McAllister took one step forward.

"I ain't asked for any—have I, Slim?" The sheriff's eyes went hard. His tanned leathery jaw came out an inch or so farther. "Long as he's going to make bond, I reckon it's fair to let him keep his gun!"

"You going to let him keep it after what he done yesterday?" Slim demanded.

"I ain't saying he done it," Bob Walters replied gently. "So far he's just accused. It's gotta be proved in court afore he's guilty!"

TOM could sense the fact that opinion was against the sheriff's decision. There was a hardening of faces all around.

"He's right handy with that gun, sheriff," Slim McAllister reminded Bob Walters.

"Yeah, that's right, Slim," the sheriff agreed placidly. "He showed you he was once when you got in a argument with him—didn't he? That's one reason I'm letting him keep it. I reckon he'll be able to take care of himself in case any of you fellers decide to try him afore we hold court!"

A cool silence lingered over the room while they waited for Jud to come back with Sye Hoskins. There was something in the flickering glances of those men when their eyes rested on Tom that told him they might not wait for a court to try him. There wasn't anything certain about his case ever coming to court, so they might decide to take the matter into their own hands. Slim McAllister would push such a thing on with them as much as he could, would offer himself as a ready leader if he could find enough following.

Sye Hoskins came in through the door. Tom could sense the unpopularity of Sye the moment he entered. It was something as tangible as the hostility against himself. Sye met it with a calm untroubled gaze. Along with Jud, the sheriff, and Tom himself, he had become through his purpose there, another man against whom the unfriendliness of public opinion was directed.

"Son, afore I sign this here bond for you, there's a coupla questions I wanta ask you," Sye told Tom. "The first one of 'em is: Was you on the ranch yesterday evening?"

Tom nodded.

"I reckon there ain't much use of asking the other one," Sye went on steadily. "I was aiming to ask if you'd stay here in town if I sign this bond for you and not try to get away, but you been top hand for us three years, and I ain't never knowed you to run away from anything yet!" He turned to the sheriff. "Bob, I'm ready to sign that bond. I own half of the Lazy S. That oughta be enough property to make me good for it—hadn't it?"

"Sye, we're objecting to you signing a bond for him!" Slim McAllister seemed to have appointed himself spokesman for those sympathizing with him.

"I reckon your objections ain't going to weigh a whole lot with Sye," the sheriff told Slim calmly. "If he's ready, we'll go on across to my office and fix up that bond."

Tom and Jud were close on the sheriff's heels as he went out the door. Men watched

them cross the street with lowering glances. The bond was signed. Tom came out of the sheriff's office to the street. Jud kept close to him. A grim quietness hung over the short street. The situation was dangerous as a high voltage electric wire, charged with possibilities of a gun fight. He couldn't lounge about the street, Tom knew, without that happening. He said to Jud:

"There ain't but one way to prove I didn't do it. That'll be to catch the ones who did. I reckon I'm ready to listen to how it happened and see if I can pick up any starting point."

"About five or six hours after you was in there yesterday," Jud began, "that money they was talking about come in. Peters and Slim McAllister met the train and got it and took it up to the bank. They left that young fellow, the clerk, in there counting it and Shorty Jones out in the bank as a kind of guard, while they crossed the street to Peters' house for a cup of coffee. They was still drinking their coffee when two buckaroos rode into town kinda quiet like and hitched in front of the bank.

"They had their hats pulled down low and didn't nobody seem to notice they had handkerchiefs tied across their faces till they was inside the bank and had six-guns shoved into Jones' face and that young fellow—what's his name, Brown. It was kinda quiet here in town about that time, anyway. Peters had stuck up a notice that the bank wouldn't pay out any money till the next day, and the excitement over it busting had kinda died down so I don't reckon more'n four or five saw 'em hitch there at the bank.

"One of them buckaroos was about your build and dressed like you are now. They was riding ponies from the range stock of the Lazy S, too. The sheriff's posse found the horses with the saddles still on 'em about two miles west of town yesterday. They musta changed horses afore they got far outa town, but the sheriff couldn't never pick up the new trail."

"Well, it does look some like I done it—don't it?" Tom pulled off his hat to mop a perspiring brow. "Especially after me shooting off my mouth like I did in the bank."

The sheriff came out of his office behind them and gazed briefly into Tom's eyes before he went on down the boardwalk. Tom read and understood the message of caution in the sheriff's glance. He spoke again to Jud:

"Which way'd they go when they rode out of town?"

"They turned the corner of the old Last Chance Saloon and that was the last anybody saw of them. There wasn't anybody paying much attention to them. Them that saw 'em go in the bank just thought they was a coupla cow hands that had rode in to see about their money."

TOM nodded absently as he moved toward the hotel across the street.

"Me, I'm going to get me a room and rest awhile," he told Jud.

Jud kept pace beside him. Once Jud's hand went to the butt of his gun in response to a similar motion on the part of a man they met. If Tom saw the man's motion he didn't betray it by the flicker of an eyelash. The man's hand came away from his gun. Tom and Jud kept on.

"Where you going, you little, sawed-off squirt?" Tom wanted to know of Jud. "Don't you know I'm bad company for you to be keeping today."

"I'm going up to that room with you. I'm figuring you'll have visitors later in the day and might need some help to entertain 'em!"

"You darned, little, bow-legged hellion! You're crazy as hell! There ain't no use of you getting mixed up in my scrap!"

"I ain't forgetting the time you picked me up and rode double with me in front of a stampede! It woulda been a cinch for you to have got away by yourself but you took a chance on taking me along!"

The group of men on the hotel porch made no hostile move as Tom and Jud passed them, but Tom understood from the grim silence falling upon the group as he approached that one careless motion on his part could start guns to roaring. He could only guess what the day would bring. Unless he could prove he didn't have a hand in the robbery, he wouldn't be allowed to leave town alive. That was fact number one for him to think upon.

Bud Ames, the landlord of the hotel, went around behind the board desk as Tom and Jud crossed the porch and went into the lobby. Tom moved over to the desk, laid a new one dollar bill upon it.

"I want a room," he told Bud briefly.

Bud examined the bill.

"There was some new one dollar bills in

that money that was taken from the bank," he observed.

A light gleamed for only an instant in Tom's eyes before he put it down.

"There sure was, come to think of it," he agreed mildly. "I reckon, too, there's some new dollar bills in 'most every county in the state. What room you want me to take?"

Bud put the bill in a drawer hastily and placed a quarter change on the desk.

"You take number ten," he told Tom.

"I'd rather have eleven," Tom objected.

"All right, take eleven then."

Tom eyed the quarter on the desk.

"Give me a deck of cards," he ordered. "I'm aiming to play a little solitaire while I'm resting."

Bud dropped the quarter into a drawer and placed a deck of cards on the desk. When Tom climbed the stairs to the upper story of the hotel Jud was still close on his heels. Jud frowned as Tom swung open the door of room number eleven.

"What you want this room for?" Jud demanded. "It's got a window looking out on the side here. They could take a pot shot at you from 'most anywhere down there in the street."

"I reckon that's right," Tom agreed placidly while he dragged a table over by the window and sat down by the table.

Carefully, methodically, he banked the cards on the table for solitaire. His back was to the window, easily visible from the street below that ran along in front of the hotel. He flipped the first card over and observed to Jud:

"Kinda funny—ain't it, Jud? That folks would be so ready to figure I done it when there's two buckaroos here that's already took part of their money away from them?"

"That was different. It was done legal like." Jud came over to stand by the window. "When a fellow says he's almost in the notion of doing something and then it's done I reckon it's natural for folks to suspect he done it. Peters talked a lot about what you said in the bank, and of course that young fellow, Brown, was in there and heard you, too."

Tom grunted and went on with his solitaire. Jud continued to gaze down at the street with interest.

"Everybody knows you've been right smart of a hellion at times, Tom," he remarked moments later.

Tom placed the queen of spades carefully on the king of diamonds and flipped over another card. Jud went over and stretched out on the bed. The midday sun passed its zenith and began the slow, downward journey. The bright streak on the window sill crept across and fell on the bare floor.

Jud rose from the bed finally and went over to the window to stare down at the street again. Tom could guess at what was going on down there. Men would be riding in to get their money from the bank. They would linger on in town after they learned the remainder of their money had been taken away from them. They would be ripe for the line of talk that Slim McAllister and Peters would hand to them.

"There's a lot of folks in town," Jud remarked finally. "And Slim McAllister's busy as a bee gathering honey among 'em. He's going from one bunch to another down there, stirring up trouble sure's a steer's got horns!"

Tom could sense the little note of impatience in Jud's tone over their own inaction. He laid the seven of hearts on the eight of clubs and waited for another remark by Jud. None came. Tom went on with his game. Jud took his gun out of its holster and twirled the cylinder.

"I don't reckon it's coming right yet, Jud." Tom glanced up at him. "They ain't quite worked up to the point of a hanging party yet."

"Tom, we'd better sneak out the back of this here hotel and get outa town. Most of them fellows down there keeps on looking up here at this window."

Tom shook his head.

"You can go ahead, Jud."

"I ain't going till you do. But it's kinda getting on my nerves, just waiting here for that crowd to do something!"

"Ain't anything to do but wait, Jud!"

Jud swung back to the window to take up his watchful waiting again. Down in the street men with guns on their hips were knotting more and more together. There were groups of eight and ten standing in spots down there now. The sheriff would be powerless to stop them once they got together on a course of action. The tension, Tom suspected, was growing tighter with each passing moment. The sun kept dragging its way downward while he went on with his game of solitaire. His whole attention seemed centered on those cards.

"They can see your back through that window," Jud told him finally, and his tone implied that he wouldn't be surprised if they started shooting at Tom's back.

TOM half turned in his chair to glance through the window at the sun. Then he rose and pulled down the shade to shut out the sun's rays.

"Pull it all the way down!" Jud protested. "They can still see your back when you set in that chair!"

Tom grinned.

"That's what I'm wanting 'em to do," he remarked mildly.

The next moment he had lifted the chair around and was slipping his shirt off over his head. Jud eyed him with a silent question. He carefully pulled the shirt down over the back of the chair and set it back in front of the window. From the street below his shirt could be seen between the window sill and the shade.

"I'm aiming to get out and do a little investigating," he told Jud. "They wouldn't let me if they didn't think I was up here playing sol. I been waiting for the sun to get low enough so I could pull that shade down." He turned toward the door into the hall.

"Where you going?" Jud wanted to know.

"If they come up here afore I get back, you tell 'em I'll be coming back all right and not fret about it!" He ignored Jud's question and pulled the door closed behind him.

At the back of the hall there was a window opening out upon the roof of a small porch shed built on the back of the hotel. Tom slipped through the window upon the shed and climbed carefully to the ground. If he were seen and recognized the natural assumption would be that he was trying to get away. He would be shot at sight. He understood that thoroughly. It was why he pulled his hat low over his face, hunched his shoulders forward, and walked with a slouching, shuffling gait along behind the row of buildings.

The chances were against him, he knew. It was only a hunch and maybe a poor one, that he was working on. There wasn't, except in his own mind, an iota of evidence against McAllister and Peters. To shift the suspicion from himself to them so suddenly would require actual proof. Behind the old Last Chance Saloon, he paused and leaned against its rear walls of rough boards in indecision.

This spot was where the bandits had last been seen. Out in the direction where the horses had been found there wasn't a sign of cover. He tried to imagine what had happened after they had turned the corner of this building he leaned against. If Peters and McAllister had been the men they wouldn't have ridden on. They must have dismounted and turned the horses they rode loose. They could have done that easily enough. But they would hardly have walked back along that alley toward Peters' home carrying the money.

He stooped down to examine the earth closely beneath the rear sills of the building. Beside the steps that led down from the door, the dust had been disturbed. There was unmistakable evidence that a package of some kind had been thrust under the building since the last rain. If his hunch was working, they had put the money under there and had come back for it after darkness came.

He moved back along the alley, to pause at the barnyard behind Peters' home. The horses of Peters and Slim McAllister stamped impatiently and nibbled at bits of dry grass that grew along the fence. Tom slipped the latch on the gate and crept inside, on to the slatted barn door, to peer between its slats at the interior of the barn. Inside a hay rack was filled to overflowing with loose hay. The barn door was securely fastened, locked with a stout padlock, hasp and staple. Tom frowned. It didn't make sense that hay rack should be full and those horses locked out until they were hungry enough to nibble at dead grass in the lot.

His pulse quickened. In a single, blinding flash of comprehension, he had the answer. His hunch was working. The money was there in the hay rack, covered up with that hay. His eyes darted around, seeking something to pry the lock loose with.

Abruptly, an angry hum and buzz reached his ears from the street beyond Peters' home. He moved over to the far side of the lot to stare past Peters' house into the street. The crowd there had been urged into action. It was moving along toward the hotel. For a moment he stood there, leaning on the fence irresolutely. He felt certain, now, the money was there in that hay rack, but there wouldn't be time to pry the lock off and prove it definitely.

Failing to find him, that mob would string Jud up.

Vaulting the fence, he crouched down and ran toward the hotel, reaching the rear of it as the crowd swarmed up on the porch in front. It was a desperate chance but he would have to depend on Peters and McAllister giving themselves away when he told where the money was. If his hunch was wrong, it would be the end. A hall on the lower floor of the hotel ran the length of the building just as it did above. Tom was in that hall, creeping along it when two men went up the stairs.

The crowd milled around out on the porch in front. He could pick out the voices of McAllister and Peters, urging the others on. The little cubby hole under the stairs offered an excellent hiding place for him. Jud came down the stairs with two men.

"He ain't here, I tell you!" Jud was insisting to them. "It was his shirt you been watching!"

"Where'd he go?" one of the men demanded.

"I don't know! I guess he got away!"

THE crowd swarmed into the lobby. Excited voices were talking in loud tones:

"String him up! String Jud up! He's been hanging around with Keys all day and helped him to get away!"

"Let's make him talk first!" Peters seemed to be leading those in the lobby.

Tom stepped out from behind the stairway. The crowd had left a little aisle to the door, making room for those still on the porch to come in. Slim McAllister stood near the door. Tom's hands were held high above his head.

"I reckon you're going to a plumb lot of trouble with Jud for nothing, folks," he told the crowd calmly. "He don't know nothing about it. I reckon I'm the one you're looking for!" He paused and surveyed those nearest him with eyes cold as steel. "You was aiming to make Jud talk. If you'll give me a chance I'll talk free!"

There was a murmur of assent from those in the front ranks. His eyes rested on Slim McAllister, though his words when he spoke were addressed to Peters, standing on his right, rather than to Slim.

"Peters, ever since you been here, you and Slim have been too stingy to give your horses more'n a few handfuls of hay at once! How come your hay rack is plumb full of hay today?"

There was a tense moment of dead silence while the crowd waited for Peters to answer that question. Peters didn't answer. He made a break for an open window but was dragged back.

Tom saw Slim McAllister go for his gun. His own movement was no less swift than Slim's. But his hands, held above his head, had farther to go. The aisle between Slim and himself widened as if by magic. A slug of hot lead in his right shoulder jarred his hand away from his gun in the instant it fell on the butt. He moved toward Slim, his left hand groping for the gun on his right hip.

His right arm hung uselessly at his side. Slim darted through the door, poked his face and gun around the casing and kept shooting. Slugs of lead tore into Tom's flesh as he lurched forward. He had his gun out at last, in his left hand.

Slim stepped out from behind the casing with an oath. Very slowly and very carefully, Tom raised the gun in his left hand and killed him. Through dazed eyes he watched Slim sink to the floor. Then, he fell face forward, crosswise of Slim's body.

It might have been days after when he heard vague voices. He was in a funny kind of place while funny kinds of smells kept coming to his nose. The doctor was bending above him. Of only one thing was he sure. He had killed Slim McAllister. The doctor was speaking to someone else. His eyes went on past the doctor. It was the sheriff. Was he still wanted?

"You can't kill hombres like him, Bob," the doctor was saying. "He'll come around all right when I get through patching him up!"

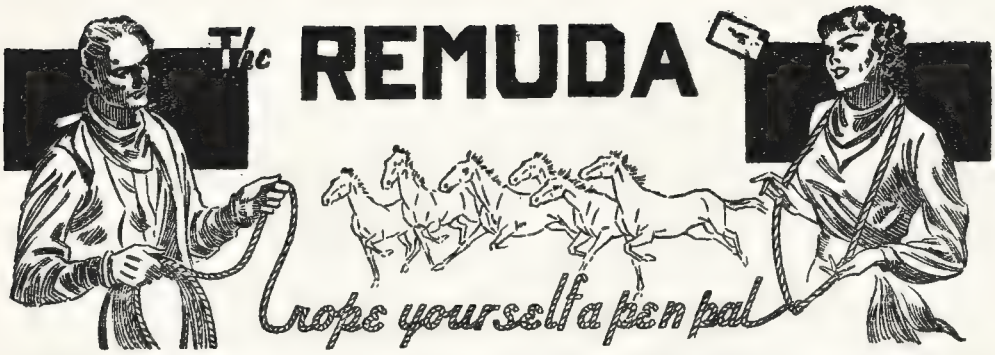
TOM'S eyes sought the sheriff again.

"Are—are you waiting for me, Bob?" he wanted to know. "I reckon I couldn't get away now!"

"Hell, no! We found the money, every dime of it in that hay rack! The crowd strung Peters up afore I could stop 'em!"

Tom flinched as the doctor probed a little deeper into his right shoulder.

"Hell, I'm going to run for sheriff next time," he told Bob Walters. "I'm right good at running down crime—ain't I? I didn't know it was them till I saw that rack full of hay and the horses locked out."



The REMUDA is open to all readers of WESTERN ACTION NOVELS. We encourage correspondence. Here, you will make new friends; perhaps thousands of miles away or right in your own home town. Send your letter in to us and we will print it in these pages. If you don't want your name and address to appear, sign your nickname and send address confidential to us and we will forward all answers to you. Let's hear what you think of this magazine. Address, Room 204, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C.

The Old Wrangler.

THIS WOMAN CAN TALK TURKEY

Dear Wrangler:

I would like to rope in a few Pen Pals.

I'm blonde with wavy hair, blue-gray eyes, 5 ft. 3 inches tall, married, will soon be 30 summers young.

I would like to hear from other wives and single women. I have some good recipes I would like to exchange. I would like to have your ideas on raising turkeys and chickens.

I'm hoping to hear from women in every state in the good old U. S. A.

I live in a little town in southern California, 45 miles from the heart of Los Angeles.

So, come on, and write to a lonesome lady.

MRS. MARJORIE J. STORY.

General Delivery,
Chino, Calif.

WHICH GENTLEMEN PREFER A BLONDE

Dear Wrangler:

I am very fond of your "Western Action Novels," but have never had the nerve to write for Pen Pals before. I am almost 19 yrs. old, 5 ft. 4 in height and 120 weight, light blonde hair and blue eyes. Love all sports under the sun, and will exchange snapshots. Come on, youse fellas, sling some ink this way.

BLONDIE.

3 Oakwood Place,
Worcester, Mass.

THIS FELLOW SOUNDS PROMISING

Dear Wrangler:

I have just finished my first issue of "Western Action Novels" and I think that "Two Gun Man," by C. A. Seltzer, is one of the best Love and Action stories I have ever read.

I am a young man of 19, stand 5 ft. 10 in. tall and tip the scales at 181 pounds, I am average looking, love all outdoor sports, especially wrestling, of which I am pretty good.

I work in the construction of a tunnel and can tell many interesting stories. I will answer every letter.

RAY DAVIS.

5614 May St.,
Chicago, Ill.

OHIO CALLING!

Dear Wrangler:

I certainly do enjoy reading "Western Action Novels" and I would like very much to join the Remuda.

I am a girl 18 years old, 5 ft. 2 in. tall, and weigh 99 lbs., my hair is dark brown and my eyes are blue-gray-green (that's the best I can describe them).

I enjoy a fireplace, books, radio, good shows, and am a sports fan.

I will answer all letters I receive, so, come on, everyone from everyplace and let's get acquainted.

AN OHIOIAN MISS.

ATTENTION! SAILORS, COWBOYS & AVIATORS

Hi! Wrangler:

How about letting me join the Remuda and get in on the great roundup. Please give me a break.

I am a young girl 18 years of age, have dark brown eyes and hair, am 5 ft. 7 in. tall and weigh 121 lbs., am very mischievous and like to do anything that is exciting. I have loads of fun wherever I go.

I play the guitar, also like to go to the movies and just love to dance. One of my greatest hobbies is collecting snapshots, so all who can, send me one won't you? I also like to ride horses, so come on, everyone, and run a race and see who can write to me first.

I would like to correspond with boys and girls between the ages of 17-26. I would like most of all to hear from a real cowboy, but sailors, aviators, and all others are quite welcome.

MISS BOBBY THOMPSON.

Route 1.
Grapevine, Texas.

LIKES EXCITING THINGS

Dear Old Wrangler:

For old times' sake, would you scare up some Pen Pals for me, the fair sex preferred. But one and all are welcome, with a guaranteed reply. I live in the good old Keystone state, with its Blue Laws and all.

I am 20 years young, 5 ft. 11½ in. tall, weigh one fifty-five and have black wavy hair and brown eyes and considered quite good looking.

I like most sports just so it has some excitement in it, but dancing is my favorite pastime plus collecting snapshots.

So, come on, all you ladies and cowgirls, drop me a line, no matter where you live or come from. I'll be interested and make sure a reply.

ROXIE OF PENN.

HE'S NOT A BRONCO-BUSTER

Dear Wrangler:

I have read only one copy of your magazine "Western Action Novels" and I found it has that "something" which all good magazines have, namely, distinction.

I am a native Montanian, but I now live in Virginia. I have lived on a ranch and on a farm, all my life. I am a good rider, but not a "bronco-buster."

I am interested in all outdoor sports and especially riding horses, hunting and swimming.

I am 16 yrs. of age, 5 ft. 8½ in. tall, weigh 135 lbs., have brown eyes, dark brown wavy hair, and I have just finished high school and was chosen as class poet.

If anyone is interested, write to me, and if you are not interested, write anyway.

VERGIL COX, JR.

Mouth of Wilson, Virginia.

HE PLAYS A GUITAR

Dear Old Wrangler:

I have been reading "Western Action Novels" right along, and it certainly is swell and if you can spare a small space in your Remuda, please chuck this in.

I would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere in the U. S. A., England and Africa.

I am seventeen years old, have dark brown hair and eyes. Am five foot eleven inches tall, weigh one hundred and thirty-three pounds.

I am interested in all outdoor sports and making other people happy. I also play the guitar.

Will gladly exchange snapshots with anyone who writes.

"SLIM."

WILL EXCHANGE SNAPS

Dear Wrangler:

I wish to tell you how much I like your magazine. I have just finished the latest copy and wishing for another.

I want to get into the Remuda. I would like to hear from boys and girls from everywhere especially from the West. I am eighteen, I have sandy hair, blue eyes, I am five feet and nine inches tall and weigh one hundred and fifty.

So, you ink slingers, be sure to sling a little ink my way. I will answer all letters, will also trade snapshots with you.

H. L. COLLINS.

Copperhill, Tenn.

CRAVES ADVENTURE

Dear Wrangler:

How's the chances for entering a young adventurous girl into your Remuda.

Well, here's a description of the little girl. I'm sixteen, blue eyes, blonde hair, five-three, weigh 110, fair complexion, also, left handed.

I enjoy sports or what have you? Will answer letters from one and all.

GERALDINE CROBBE.

Box 88,
Broseley, Mo.

A SAILOR WANTS TO TELL ALL

Dear Wrangler:

I am a sailor, I am not lonely but have lots of spare time and like to pass it by reading and writing. I am 20 years old, have brown eyes, brown hair, and am five feet six inches tall.

I have been to China and am now in Honolulu, Hawaii, so I will be able to tell of what the other parts of the world are like.

I have been a steady and faithful reader of your magazine for quite some time. It is with this reason that I am asking you to print this plea for Pen Pals. I promise to answer all letters received.

R. C. HOSKINS.

U. S. S. Beaver,
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

PHOTOGRAPHY FAN

Dear Wrangler:

I hope you will give me a break and let me join the "Remuda." I am so lonely in this country and I would like to hear from Pen Pals from U. S. A. and any part of the world.

I am 22 years old, 5 ft. 9 in. tall and I weigh 162 lbs.

I like all kinds of sport, and I am interested in dancing and photography.

I will answer all letters and I will exchange any snaps that come my way.

So, come on, pals, hurry up and write.

ED. PARNELL.

18th Field Bde.,
Mhow, C. P., India.

AN ELECTRICAL ENTHUSIAST

Dear Wrangler:

I am a steady reader of "Western Magazine," and really like it fine. I see everyone is wanting Pen Pals, so I thought I may get some, too. I am 28 years old, weigh 179 lbs., 5 foot 11 inches tall, dark brown wavy hair, blue eyes. I am a native of California and will return there in the Fall. I am an electrician by trade, so anything that has to do with electricity interests me. I also like all sports. I travel quite a lot, have a new car and sure enjoy the open road. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who would care to write to me. I promise to answer all letters by return mail. Will exchange snapshots, also.

VICTOR E. BROSSORT.

60½ North Garfield Ave.,
Zanesville, Wisconsin.

IS THERE A GOOD-LOOKING GIRL AROUND

Hi There! Wrangler:

I hope you will give me a break this time and help me find some Pen Pals. Here is my description: fair golden hair, pale blue eyes, clear complexion, 185 pounds. How's that, not bad. My hobby is swimming and shooting. I was born in Texas and have been all over the world. So come all you boys and girls, and write to a lonely fellow. By the way, I will exchange snapshots with anybody especially with a good-looking girl.

IAN RENNIE.

105 Buccleugh Street,
Edinburgh, Scotland.

IT'S LONELY IN LOUISIANA

Hello Wrangler:

I'm very lonely, and would like some Pen Pals.

I'm 17 yrs. old, 6 ft. tall, weigh 150 lb., wavy brown hair, greenish eyes and a fair complexion.

Now, come on and write to a lonely Louisiana boy.

ANTOINE (CABBY) CORTEZ.

R. No. 3, Box 30.
Church Point, Louisiana.

THIS LITTLE MISS WANTS PALS

Dear Wrangler:

I am about five feet four inches tall, have blonde hair and brown eyes, a clear complexion and am fifteen years old, I weigh about 108 lbs. I hope you will publish this for me for I am anxious to receive Pen Pals from all over the world. I have read your magazine for the first time, and I find it very interesting. I hope to look forward to many more of your books.

MISS AUDREY HICKSWA.

57 Wallington Avenue,
Wallington, New Jersey.

LIKES DANCING AND MUSIC

Dear Wrangler:

I am a young girl 17 years old, have black wavy hair and brown eyes, light complexion, weigh 125 lbs., height 5 feet two. I will exchange photos with anyone. I am also interested in music, dancing and sports. Here's hoping to hear from all soon.

DORA MAE MILLER.

1804 Tampa St.,
Tampa, Fla.

HIS HOBBY IS STAMPS

Dear Wrangler:

How are chances of joining the Remuda? I will write to any who write, and try to make my letters interesting. Like all sports, camping and traveling. My hobby is stamps.

I am 5 ft. 7 inches tall, weigh 137 lbs., blue eyes and brown hair and 26 years old. Come on, everyone, write now and I will answer.

ED.

Lynn, Mass.

EX-CCC

Dear Old Wrangler:

I am writing this letter asking you if you will please put this in your Remuda.

I am not in the CCC now. If all the young folks between the ages of 19 to 22 will write to me, I will gladly answer all letters.

I thank you.

ANTHONY JUSKEWITCH.

46 River Street,
Rumford, Me.

HE'S A POET, TOO!

Dear Wrangler:

May I commend you on your department, and also on the general excellence, not only of "Western Action Novels," in which the department appears, but of all the "Double Action Publications," which top their respective fields.

I shall appreciate your assistance in securing a great number of correspondents among your readers, especially those interested in songs and writing. Young ladies are especially desirable, as my correspondents among the fair sex are all too few.

I am a Texas lad, 5 ft. 9 in. in height, with blue eyes and light brown hair, and not quite twenty-five years of age. I am seriously interested in writing poems and popular songs, in addition to short stories, and have had some success in all lines.

To each of the first dozen young ladies who write, and who are seriously interested in a career of writing, I will send a souvenir of the Texas Centennial. With all good wishes, I am

THE SONGWRITER.

SHE'S NOT TOO SHY TO WRITE

Dear Old Wrangler:

I am shy and I came from the West and I would like to go back some day. I like to cook, dance, read books, listen to the radio, keep house and ride horses.

Here is my description: golden brown hair, blue eyes, fair skin, age 14, I weigh 75 pounds.

Won't you please get me some Pen Pals?

MISS PATRICIA GREER.

7818 6th Ave. So.,
Birmingham, Alabama.

CALLING TEXANS

Dear Wrangler:

I would like to have the boys and girls from Texas to write me a letter. I will answer all I get. I would like to be out in a round-up.

I have blonde hair, blue eyes, I am 5 ft. 2 in. tall, I weigh 150 lbs., I am 16 years old.

MISS RUTH CRONE.

Hill St.,
Evans City, Pa.

HE'S STILL TRYING

Dear Wrangler:

This is my first try at this mag., but not the last, for it sure is a good one.

I am an old man 43 years of age, whose eyesight is kind of dim and would like some widows young and old to brighten them up a bit. Have travelled somewhat. Single maidens may write, but none under 25 years.

HAROLD N. PINKHAM.

547 Highland Ave.,
Malden, Mass.

HERE'S A REAL RANCH GIRL

Dear Wrangler:

Here is another girl from away out West who would like to have some Pen Pals.

I am a ranch girl, 17 years old, 5 ft. 7 in. tall, weigh 124 lbs., have brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Am interested in anything that spells fun—like to ride and swim about as well as anything, tho'.

Now I'd like to hear from sailors, CCC boys, southern gals, also anybody else who cares to write. Come on, boys and girls, drop me a line and I don't think any of you will be disappointed.

MISS LEE NEILSEN.

El Dorado, Cal.

SPEAKS NORWEGIAN PERFECTLY

Dear Wrangler:

I have just finished reading the July issue of "Western Action Novels" and I sure am going to continue reading your magazine, as it is very exciting, indeed. I would like to correspond with Pen Pals from all over the world and I will answer all letters of both sexes.

I am 18 years old, brown hair and gray eyes, 5 ft. 5 in. tall, I weigh 140. I am also of Norwegian descent, can speak the language perfectly. I will also send photos of myself to anyone who wants it. Take a chance in writing to me as I will be waiting, hoping, and praying that the mailman doesn't pass my door.

JOHN JENSEN.

28 East 111th St.,
New York City.

WILL EXCHANGE SNAPSHOTS

Dear Wrangler:

I have one Pen Pal now and I'd like to have many more, so please see what you can do for me. I am 6 ft. 1 in. tall, brown hair and gray eyes, weigh 165 lbs. and am 20 years old. So, come one, come all, will answer every letter received and exchange snapshots.

JAMES SVOBODA.

4126 S. Home Ave.,
Bowyn, Ill.

FOREIGNERS TAKE NOTE

Dear Wrangler:

I would like to receive letters from Pen Pals all over the world. I am a young girl of 16, I have light brown hair and eyes and am 5 ft. 4½ inches tall, weigh 123 lbs. My favorite sports are baseball and basketball. Will exchange photos and postcards with all who write. Would especially like to receive letters from pals in foreign countries. So, come on pals, and write to

ALMA M. BERARD.

R. F. D. No. 2,
Woonsocket, Rhode Island.

WILL SEND SOUVENIRS TO ALL WHO ANSWER

Dear Wrangler:

I've been reading your magazine for some time and find it to be the best on the market. Have just finished reading "Coming Thru," and sure hope you will print more like it.

I wonder if you could find space in the Remuda for a young lonely watchman. Am twenty years of age and welcome all correspondence from both sexes, from near or far, and promise to answer every letter.

Will send a free souvenir to all who write, a gift of the Century of Progress, World Fair. So, come on folks, get them pens a goin' and let me hear from you all.

LAURENCE C. ZIELER.

3402 So. Fisk Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

ANSWER THIS LONESOME LAD

Dear Wrangler:

I wish you would get me some Pen Pals, both male and female. I have plenty of time to write, so I will answer all letters. I am 16 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, brown hair, brown eyes. Hoping to hear from some Pen Pals soon.

JOHNNY HERRICK.

St. Vincent Hospital,
St. Lawrence Hall,
New York City, N. Y.

AIRPLANE BUILDER

Dear Sir:

I would like to have some Pen Pals, especially from the West, but I also want some from just anywhere.

I am 16 years old, have black hair, and brown eyes, five foot eleven and one-fourth inches tall, weight around 140 or more.

My main hobby is model airplanes, but I like to write and also to receive letters from girls near my own age or boys of the same age.

So please hurry and write me.

FREDERICK LEADLOVE.

Box 141,
Venice, Illinois.

GIVE A PAL A BREAK

Dear Wrangler:

I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all parts of the country.

I am 21 years old, 5 feet 11 inches, 165 pounds, blue eyes and light brown hair. I am interested in all sports, including dancing.

Give a pal a break and write soon. Will answer letters from girls also.

STEVE GASTON.

369 Columbia Street,
Cambridge, Mass.

URGENT REQUEST

Dear Wrangler:

Please print my request for Pen Pals in your column. I am a boy, twenty years old, with brown hair, and blue eyes, 5 ft. 6 in., and weigh 120 pounds.

I love all sports, especially baseball and football. Would like to hear from girls and boys from 17 to 25 years old. I promise to answer every letter I receive. Come on, girls and boys and make the mail man earn his salary. I'll be waiting for you all.

BARTLEY CONLON.

1350 N. Lawndale Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

U. S. TRAVELER

Dear Wrangler:

I've traveled over part of U. S., mostly thru the West. Think I'd like to visit Canada someday.

Have lived on the farm for two years but am becoming dissatisfied. I would like to travel some more and see new faces.

The only sports that interest me, are boxing, wrestling, football, and tennis. And I've spent a lotta time with each. For vocal expression, I like singing.

Am 6 ft. 2 inches high, weigh 188 lbs., black hair, brown eyes; 22 yrs. old.

Now, I've got a few pals, girls and fellows that I see now and then but I've never had a Pen Pal. So do me a favor, print this and help me get a few of these pals. I'll answer and exchange snap for snap. Come girls, write to me. Fellows, you too.

GENE REVIS.

Rural Route 4,
Frankfort, Indiana.

THE TRADING POST

Here is where the readers of WESTERN ACTION NOVELS can exchange something they have, but do not want, for something that someone else may have and that you may want.
This is a free service, but your announcement must not exceed 28 words. It must be understood that WESTERN ACTION NOVELS is not responsible for losses sustained.
Print your announcement clearly. Nothing but bona fide "swaps" will be inserted. No sales.
Enclose clipping of this announcement with your "swap."

Song writers library—lyrics of past song hits, song writing instruction books, rhyming dictionary, etc., to swap. What have you? George H. Homer, 1305 W. Harrison St., Chicago, Ill.

No money needed. Exchange your duplicate stamps based on Scott Catalog prices. Niles, 1928 Farnam, Davenport, Iowa.

Wanted: used I.C.S. courses. Have typewriter and .22 rifle. R. A. Whaley, 921 Alabama Ave., Fort Payne, Ala.

Will swap matchbook covers with anybody outside of California. Jim Anderson, 5816 Shattuck Ave., Oakland, Calif.

Will swap electric trains, movie camera, stamp album, for a typewriter or what have you? Harry Hansen, 4923 6th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Have Jowett physical course, iron shoe strength builder, hand grips, Saxon barbell course, Penman course. Want good guitar, watches, S. & W. .22 revolver. T. L. Tyndall, R. 3, Box 30, Snow Hill, N. C.

Wanted, stamps old U.S. and foreign. Send 100 different for 100 different of mine. Stamps from Islands preferred. Nancy Lou Dale, 1135 Jefferson Ave., Evansville, Ind.

Want Atlas, Jowett, and Arco physical culture courses, old time strength books, and a 4.5 anastigmat lens camera with compur shutter, for? G. Nisivoccia, 239-A, Mt. Prospect Ave., Newark, N. J.

Will trade a microscope set in perfect condition, almost brand new, for a small printing press or what have you? Hans Hansen, 617 50th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

We will develop your Kodak films in exchange for Indian relics, coins, guns, binoculars, books, lenses, or offers. We do quality finishing. Osborne's Studio, Jonesboro, Tenn.

To trade, new .38 Colt automatic for .22 Colt Woodsman or Colt .22 revolver. V. F. Byman, Big Falls, Minn.

Swap, Jewell radio test set No. 95, cost $75, new condition, five good meters, for U.S. stamps. All letters answered. Roy L. Miller, 1008 Summit Ave., Corsicana, Texas.

Have 50 Western books, camera, tire pump, Parker fountain pen, stamp collection, Daisy BB gun, also Alumo ice skates. Want good typewriter and a taking moving picture camera or a Hamel or Benjamin BB gun. My collection is worth $18. Eric Ericson, Jr., 23 Troy Street, Jersey City, New Jersey.

Have new Autostrop razor, a magnifying glass cost $3.75 when new, a psychic baseball game, and stamps. Want other foreign and U.S. stamps and stamp albums. Major Butler, Duffee, Miss.

Have Remington typewriter, 38 spl. S. & W. revolver, 4x5 view camera. Want 5x8 or 6x9 printing press, or 8x10 camera lens. Osborne's Studio, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Wanted, stamps, old U.S. and foreign. Send 100 of yours for 100 of mine. Each stamp different. Nancy Lou Dale, 1135 Jefferson Ave., Evansville, Ind.

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U. S. half dollar over 100 years old	$1.00
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U. S. gold dollar, old, fine	2.35
10 different dates of Indian head cents	25¢
U. S. Colonial bill 1797, fine, rare	1.00
Confederate $10.00 bill, artillery	10¢
Virginia $1.00 treasury note, pretty	10¢
Georgia $5.00 bill, 1862, fine	10¢
Confederate bill 50¢; Jackson	10¢
California gold quarter, queer	25¢
California gold half, queer	50¢
10 different queer foreign bills	10¢
10 different foreign coins	15¢
5 different foreign nickel coins	10¢
Roman bronze B.C. coin, Roman soldiers	25¢
Foreign old nice silver dollar	95¢
Foreign coin over 100 years old	10¢
Foreign coin, fine, dated before 1800	15¢
Foreign coin, fine, dated before 1700	25¢
Foreign coin, dated before 1600	50¢
$2.00 catalogue value of different fine foreign stamps	25¢
100 different fine foreign stamps	10¢
5 different fine foreign covers	15¢
25 different nice U. S. stamps	10¢
U. S. first flight cover, fine	15¢
U. S. first day cover	15¢
U. S. fine cachet cover	10¢
100 mixed foreign stamps	6¢
1000 mixed foreign stamps	35¢
1000 different foreign stamps, fine collection	1.25
Ohio pretty 5¢ fractional currency bill, 1862	10¢
500 different fine foreign stamps	75¢
$10.00 catalogue value fine different foreign stamps	1.00
5 different camera photos of pretty French bathing beauties	25¢
Ivory telescope watch charm, Lord's prayer in it	15¢
Ivory telescope watch charm, ten commandments in it	15¢
Ivory telescope watch charm, pretty French girl in it	15¢
Miniature queer Aztec pottery	10¢
Tesuque (used) genuine Indian pipebowl	75¢
Catawaba (used) genuine Indian pipebowl	25¢
Pair Sioux beaded buckskin moccasins	1.50
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Solid beaded, pretty, leather belt, fine buckle	3.00
Solid beaded, pretty, hat band wide	1.50
Woven, pretty designed, horse hair belt	2.85
Miniature, pretty, pistol shoots a real shell, beauty	1.00
New hunting knife, genuine deer foot handle	1.25
New hunting knife, pretty goldstone handle, in sheath	1.25
New belt spots and sets on natural hide with hair on	1.50

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M. M. M. Publishers,
Dept. MA2 Studio Bldg., Portland, Ore.

Have one Eastman No. 125 box camera, takes 4 sizes pictures, like new, 40 Western magazines, one Criterion pocket watch, new. Will trade for .22 rifle or revolver. Write Rodney Waterman, Coquille, Oregon.

Have 410 single, good, 20 and 16 g. single, new fishing rods, real Lanzewood; new 8-day winding watch (men); lots of other items. Want scientific fiction mags. or offers. Max Belz, Waldoboro, Me.

Make offers for mounted red squirrel lamp, raw gold set tie pin, opal tie pin, Eastman camera, aviation course, .32 S. & W. revolver, 45-70 Springfield army rifle, .22 revolver, baseball shoes, fishing reel. Don Hamilton, East Liberty, Ohio.

Outboard motor, 12 ga. repeater gun, Marlin pump, gas lamps, gas lanterns, rotary clock, and many other articles of value. What have you? Peter Johnson, Box 293, Ray, Minn.

Have omnigraph, toy transformer. Want "Waukishau" Ricardo head, counter-balanced crankshaft for T Ford. Dollar commission for name of person having these for sale. Marvin Kershner, Paris, Mich.

Want Woodsman 4½" HiSpeed, .38 regulation police, polychoked barrel for 16 Rem. auto, quality 16 double shotgun, 357 Magnum. R. Welker, 406 No. Harvey, Oak Park, Ill.

What am I offered in trade for a Corona portable typewriter or 7x5x4 ft. pup tent? S. Troch, Jr., 100 W. Washington St., Nanticoke, Pa.

Will swap big envelope of mail order propositions and papers for Liberty head nickel. Ad space in mail order paper to swap for eight 1½¢ stamps (limit 25 words). Crawford, 69 Bay St., Newport, Vermont.

Want guns and watches. Have mounted barred owl, raw gold set tie pin, opal tie pin, Eastman camera, $65 aviation course, .32 S. & W. revolver, baseball shoes, fishing reel, banjo, No. 3 Brownie camera. Donald Hamilton, East Liberty, Ohio.

Have airplane and boat model kits and supplies, minerals, curios, sea shells, electrical parts. Want fine minerals, petrified wood, crystals, gem stones, ores, etc. H. Holcomb, 6 Maple Ave., Rockville Centre, N. Y.

Have banjo-uke, value $15; set drafting tools and triangles, value $14; cigar lighter, value $5. Want plate barbell and course. C. Stephens, 1707 Eastern Ave., Covington, Ky.

Will swap my new hobby of jokes for one quarter dated before 1930. The new hobby of jokes works the way you save stamps. You can sell or trade them. Please send a stamp. H. Berg, Jr., 2567 E. Main St., Springfield, Ohio.

Have Franklin Institute course for Railway Mail Clerk. Also course in show card writing, and others. Want Colt Woodsman or Sportsman, or what have you? Lawrence Reynolds, Addison, Maine.

Fifty foreign stamps for each Liberty Head nickel before 1900. Postcards ignored. James H. Glass, Box 15, Conway, Arkansas.

Will swap powder horn, brass 16 ga. shells and primers, Indian relics, Allen & Wheelock .22 pistol, Iver Johnson .32, new; antiques, old postal cards, stamps, lathe chisels, for old U.S. coins. C. Mitchell, Hanover, Ill., Box 41.

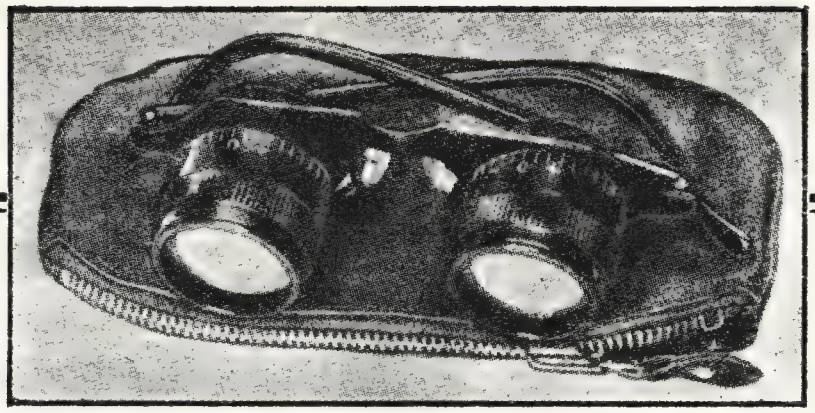
Want Savage .22 rifle, Winchester .22 rifle, or Colt .32, or what have you? Will trade Hawaiian Koa work for them. Kit Koda, Wailuku, Maui, Market Street, P. O. Box 718.

Have 38-40 Winchester, single shot in fair condition, also bolo knife from Philippines, new. L. Johnson, Aneta, No. Dak.

Want, short wave radio to trade for 45 magazines and brand new full size telescope with 5 ft. adjustable wood tripod that magnifies 30 times. Steve Makowski, 921 Fruit Ave., Farrell, Pa.

Have broken Beagles, pups, all A.K.C. reg. stock, some with papers. Want guns, tent, or any hunting equipment I can use. What have you? Wm. Nankey, 312 Williams St., Ludington, Mich.

Have thousands of back numbers of different magazines. Send 3c. stamp for list. Want anything of value. Magazine Exchange, Baseline and G Sts., San Bernardino, Calif.



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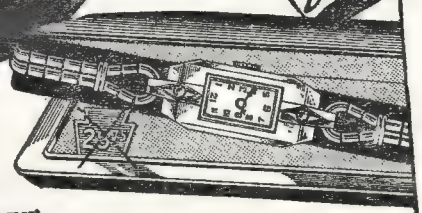

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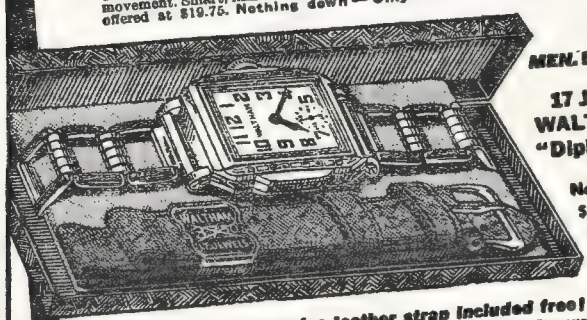

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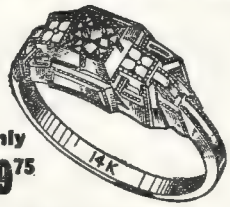

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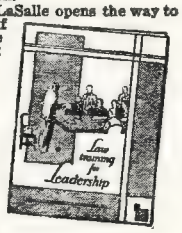

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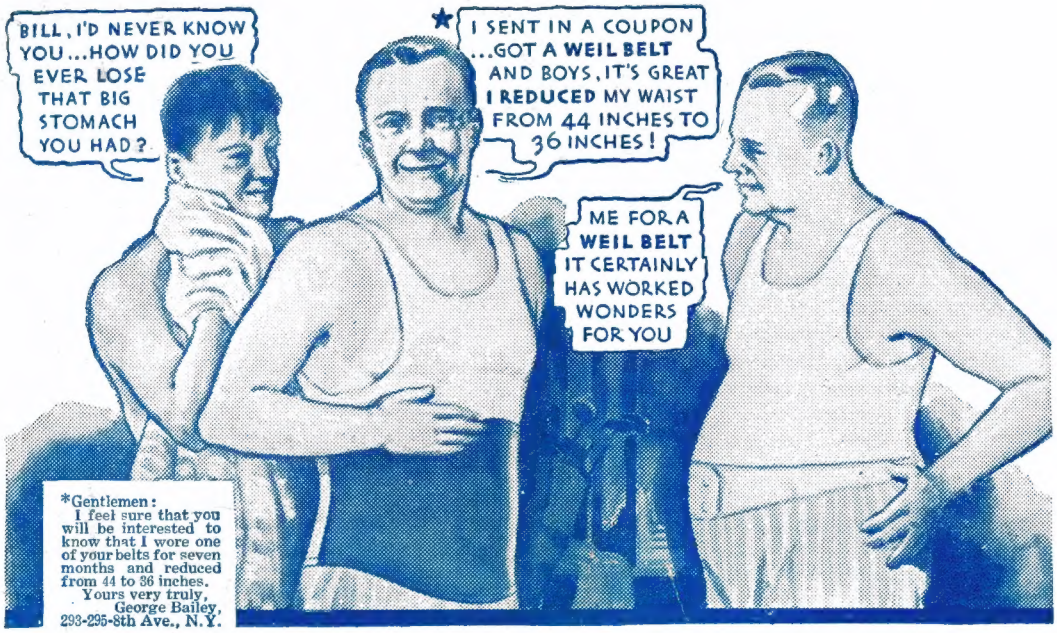

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